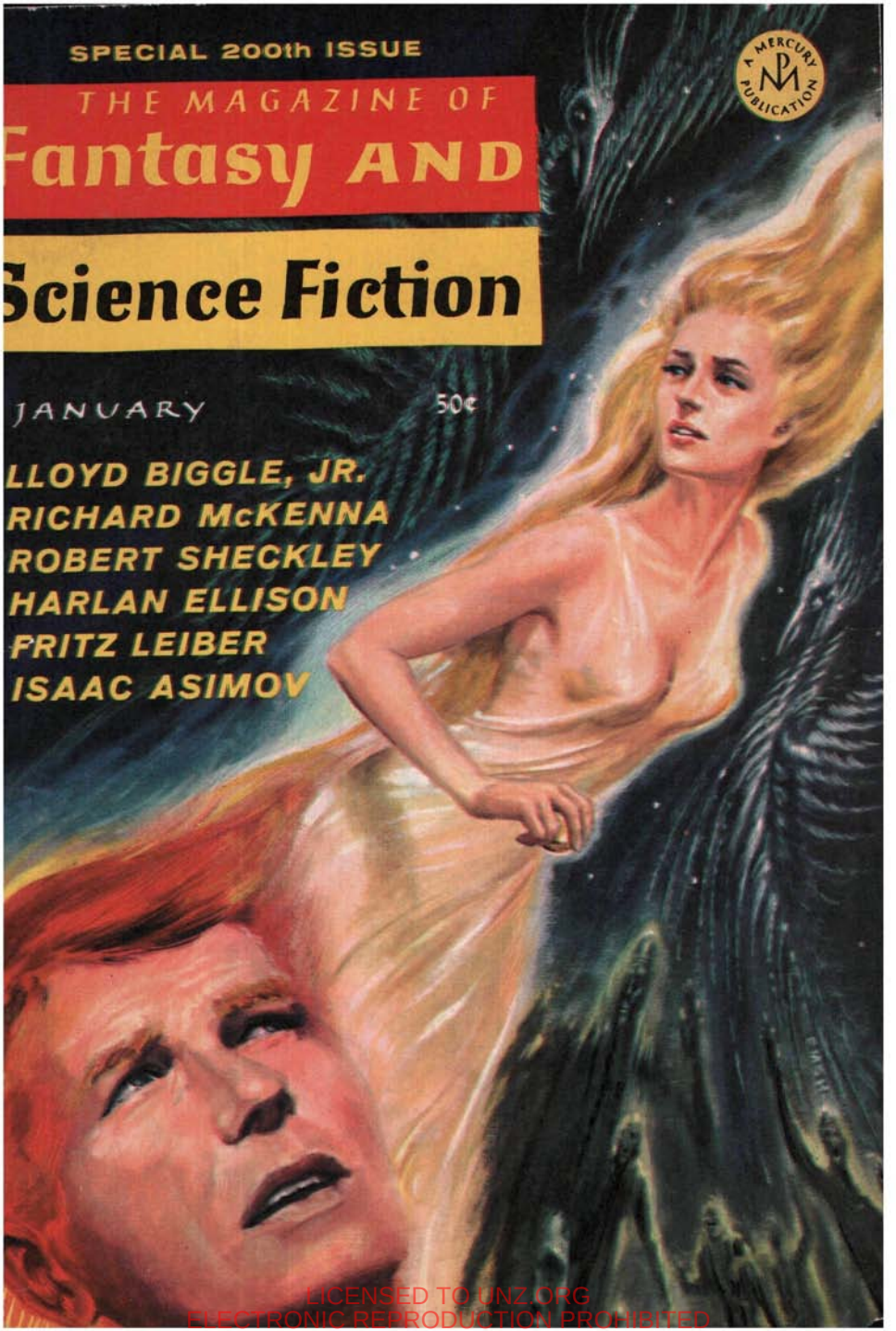

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295
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Fantasy and Science Fiction

JANUARY *Including Venture Science Fiction*

NOVELETS

They Are Not Robbed — RICHARD MCKENNA — 5

I See A Man Sitting On A Chair, and the Chair Is Biting His Leg — ROBERT SHECKLEY and HARLAN ELLISON — 43

Crack In the Shield — ARTHUR SELLINGS — 75

SHORT STORIES

The Turned-off Heads — FRITZ LEIBER — 32

Light On Cader — JOSEPHINE SAXTON — 66

Lunatic Assignment — SONYA DORMAN — 111

In His Own Image — LLOYD BIGGLE, JR. — 118

FEATURES

Cartoon — GAHAN WILSON — 36

Books — JOANNA RUSS, SAMUEL R. DELANY, TERRY CARR — 37

Science: The Seventh Metal — ISAAC ASIMOV — 101

F&SF Marketplace — 129

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This is the second of two previously unpublished science fiction stories by the late Richard McKenna. (*See also* HOME THE HARD WAY, *October 1967.*) *It is the compelling story of the alien Star Birds, who offered money and health and "change"—a change as elusive and important as the concept of time itself—to those few with eyes open enough to see.*

THEY ARE NOT ROBBED

by Richard McKenna

BLACK MARKET GASOLINE COST ten dollars a gallon at the energy crisis peak in 1980. The Carson Treaty, negotiated between the United Nations and the UFO entities in that year, seemed a godsend to men and gadgets despairingly uncritical. A few old people muttered about long spoons.

The Aliens agreed to sell electricity for two mills per KWH and to expend the monies paid them within the domestic economy from which it came. They set up gray boxes with massive protruding bus bars in power plants everywhere. Power output was unlimited. Hydrocarbon reserves went back into motor fuels and wheels rolled again across the exultant nations.

No cultural exchanges, the Aliens stipulated, and no wonder, for they were strange past description. Most people could not see them at all. Others saw them as light aberrations on the edge of vision and swore their own eye muscles refused to fix and focus. Photos showed only a distortion of background. Mostly from children's reports, a composite image emerged: tall, pliant, gray-white, a hint of feathers and a long beak. The people called them Star Birds.

The Star Birds spoke and acted through human Agents, and a few old men thought the greatest mystery about these was the public incuriosity. They were personable young single women who had been living unnoticed all along as white-collar girls in the world's large cities. They insisted they were of Earthly origin, but none could remember just where. The life data

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in their papers was fraudulent. They gave each other as next of kin, but they were of all races and obviously not all sisters.

Amnesia cases, the public explained to itself, kidnaped and conditioned by Star Birds. But the Agents seemed healthy and happy, the treaty kept them under law and taxes, and wheels rolled. So what, then?

So the Star Birds opened Purchasing Offices in city after city.

Always the same pattern: an Agent bought up leases along a hundred-foot small business frontage. Instantaneously in some predawn a shimmering, fifty-foot gray wall replaced the shabby fronts. Tangent to the sidewalk, in the center a ten-foot circular area served as door. Tiny lightnings played over its opalescent surface. Along the wall, two on each side of the door, silver ellipses one by two feet were inset horizontally at shoulder height.

Force field structures, the public explained to itself, because the impassable walls gave no tactile sensation except at the silver test plates. Those who wished to sell were told to place forehead and palms against the test plates. If they qualified, a self-luminous golden ovoid would materialize under one hand, and it would pass them through the circular door area. It was dangerous for any person other than the recipient to touch the ovoid. Scores failed to activate the test plates, for each one who succeeded. Those who did go inside the Office did not come out again.

They always reappeared, vague about how and where and about what they had experienced. But where needed their bones were straightened, muscles made strong, teeth restored, skins firmed and cleared and blurred senses sharpened. Within a few days each received from the local Star Bird business office a check for any sum from one to fifty thousand dollars.

This caught the public interest. Time stasis and biofields, it explained it to itself. The Star Birds bought raw neural energy or else recorded dynamic patterns of neural energy. But what *use* did they make of it? What *good* was it?

No one could say. Aldous Huxley came out of retirement to try his luck. When reporters found him again, he said it was like a long dream during which he wrote the novel that had struggled in vain all his life to shape itself within him. He could not remember what it was about. That same day an Italian janitor in Chicago tried to speak plainly. He said it was all glorious music in which he was himself a theme endlessly, variously repeated. He tried to hum it, but could not.

The Star Birds sent Huxley seventy thousand dollars. The janitor received four hundred thousand.

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Occult and pseudo-scientific pamphlets explained the Star Birds in a hundred ways. Training courses for those unable to activate the test plates mushroomed in a cloud of worthless guarantees and testimonials. Like a lottery, unfair, the people cried.

The UN asked the Star Birds to sell health. Not possible, the spokesman Agent said; those who can, heal themselves incidental to the sale. Buy raw materials and manufactured articles, the UN urged. We do, said the spokesman Agent, such as we can use. Duress was not practicable while the power need lasted. Legislative bodies placated the people with confiscatory surtaxes on Star Bird windfalls, and it was not enough.

Unfair, unfair, the people cried.

Red-haired young Christopher Lane whistled as he worked alone in his bay of the cavernous assembly wing. It was Acme Furniture Company's day to picket the Eagle City Purchasing Office, and Lane had paid a fellow workman ten dollars to take his place in the picket line. He liked working best when half the force was off picketing.

Lane cast wary hazel eyes each way, then scribbled "The secret smile of a cat. It pounces." on a cedar lining slab. He lay the pine top over it, power-drove home the long corner screws and slid the completed dresser shell into the next bay where Gault would veneer it. Last one today.

Writing those things pleased Lane. It gave each dresser something they couldn't get their fingers on, not knowing.

In the crowd waiting to punch out through the time clocks, Lane heard tall Dan Gault up ahead arguing hotly about Star Birds.

"So what if they do grow new teeth or new eyes in some lucky ape? I don't *lose* nothing, do I?"

"It ain't *fair*, God damn it!" insisted Reilly, the fat, frog-voiced little shop steward. "They should do it for everybody or nobody."

"It's what they get, bothers me," said the man with his chin on Lane's left shoulder.

"Must be worth a thousand times what they pay us," said the man on Lane's right foot.

"If we only knew what it *was*," said the man with the elbow.

"Or even just how to *use* it," said the man with the foul breath.

"Yeah," Lane said. He broke free through the chrome turnstile.

Ten minutes of rapid walking brought him to Mrs. Calthorp's white-painted, two-story boarding house with its wide veranda and smooth lawn. Lane had forty minutes left to bathe and dress for his routine Thursday night date with Alma Butelle. Old Mrs. Greene, all chins and hair wisps, halted him on the veranda for a rambling chat. He agreed Mrs. Calthorp was stingy about food because she was los-

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ing her figure and promised to help Mrs. Greene repot her geraniums, come Sunday.

After dressing in his neat, gray papered room he looked regretfully at the book on his desk, Graves' *White Goddess,* and tiptoed out along the upstairs hall. Miss Weber, the skinny, pinchfaced schoolteacher, popped out of her room by the stairwell. Simpering, she showed Lane where she wanted the little shelf put, he was so handy with tools and all.

"No trouble, Miss Weber. Be glad to, come Sunday."

Lane excused himself several times and at last ran downstairs into the lower hall. St. Martin Buckley stopped him with a hail from the red plastic TV parlor to right.

"Hey Chris boy, howsabout wheels and beers and babes tonight, out on the road?"

"It's Thursday, Buck. My date with Alma, I'm late now—"

"Bring her along, boy! Nothing like wheels to shake 'em loose from that stuff!"

Lane made his self-depreciatory gesture and his thin face flushed under its freckles.

"I'm sorry, Buck, got a table reserved at the Golden Pheasant and all. . . ."

"Okay Chris, skip it. How's to take twenty till payday?"

"Sure, Buck."

Walking the ten blocks to Alma's apartment, Lane thought about Buckley. His lean, dark vigor, his coarse features, his way of standing too close and looking down at Lane, talking too loud and fast. The borrowings never repaid. Lane knew obscurely that the gift-loans absolved him of his sin of not needing all he earned. They bought him permission to go on being Lane.

Both Alma and Buckley worked in Sales at Acme. Once she had been Buckley's girl, now she was somehow Lane's, at least on Thursdays. Tall as Lane, plump, dark haired, full lipped, driven by ancient hungers, she might have been Buckley's sister. She too was a ransom he paid for the right to be Christopher Lane. But paid to whom, in the end?

To his knock Alma called through the door come in, she was in her bath. He entered, knowing the rest.

"Make us a drink, Chris lamb, while you wait." Splashing.

Red sofa and rug, bamboo coffee table, maple TV, movie and fashion magazines, white enamel in the alcove. He mixed two highballs, one weak.

"Chris lamb, please bring my robe from the bedroom. You know how I run around just wearing me when I'm alone."

Scented bedroom. Filmy stockings on the pink chenille. Black lace bra and panties lying apart in *just* the positions—that much was new.

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The perfumed bare arm took the robe around the door edge.

"We're all naked just inches in behind here," it undulated at him.

"No fair peeking!" Alma giggled.

It bothered him, all right. He would have to go to South Bend Sunday afternoon, to that hotel and the placid Polish girl. The Graves book was almost overdue—oh well.

Long pink legs flashed through the robe clutched under the dark smile as Alma scuttled across to the bedroom. She came out again in rhinestones and red wool and gulped the strong highball.

"I just *love* the way you mix 'em," she said. "Oh Chris, Ruth tried to paint her apartment and she's made *such* a mess. I told her Saturday and Sunday."

"Oh . . . all right."

Alma giggled. "We'll both wear our new playsuits just for you, Chris. You'll *love* that!"

Alma loved the movie, she said. She clutched Lane's arms in the tense parts, leaned on his shoulder through the tender ones and munched popcorn steadily. She chewed steak tirelessly through the floor show at the Golden Pheasant and drank martinis afterward, waiting for the midnight show. She chattered of food and movies and told Lane he really *must* learn to dance, he'd *love* it.

When he took her home, Alma insisted that he pay off the cab and come up for coffee. He sat glumly on the red sofa while she worked in the alcove.

"I hear talk in the front office," she said, coffee water splashing. "You turned down being assembly foreman again."

"Well . . . yes." He clasped and unclasped thin, nervous hands.

"Chris, you're *hopeless!* You drift and people take advantage of you and your talent and all—look when you invented the thingajig for dresser frames."

"I got a bonus," he said defensively.

"Yes, and they were able to take away your helper and make it back in a month. Now you have to do the same job alone."

That was the bonus, he thought, but how tell her? She plopped beside him on the red sofa.

"If you were foreman, you could buy a car. You could anyway."

"Being foreman eats up living time," he said slowly. "So does a car."

"Something's *wrong* with you, Chris! You don't want to live. There's just nothing like a car for killing time."

He moved away slightly.

"I wonder if I shouldn't go try my luck at the Purchasing Office," he said.

"No!" she said. "You could only keep a few hundred dollars and the Star Birds would *change* you."

"Well, don't I need to change?"

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"No, no! Don't think about Star Birds!"

The silex boiled over, hissing, and she ran to take it off the gas flame.

What *changes* in Star Bird victims? the people demanded. Health and wholeness, yes yes, but the catch? the gimmick?

In England, Grey Walter, Nobelman and world dean of electroencephalography, found a clue. The evanescent Tau component, isolated and named by Walter in the sixties, was always present abnormally in the EEG's of persons examined who later were able to activate the silver plates. Tested after the Purchase experience, their Tau was better developed and no longer subject to experimental interference. All Agents tested had strong Tau. But all Walter could say about Tau was that it gave queer subjective time distortions under resonant energy input with flicker. Factor analysts around the world correlated Tau with all measurable trait complexes.

Ministers who denounced Tau as unholy could usually be brought to say they felt it so because it was new in human experience. Some critics and psychologists wondered whether the Star Birds might not be siphoning off a store of mankind's unused creativity. Nonsense, said others, pointing to galleries dripping with new paintings and editorial offices bulging with manuscripts. Radio and TV were never silent. And wheels rolled.

In Terre Haute, psychiatrist Joseph Weinstein found Tau in many patients. He took them a few at a time to the local Purchasing Office and emptied two back wards. Then federal judge Frederick Welborn enjoined the practice—Tau therapy, Weinstein called it—to protect the certified. Better lobotomy than Tau, the people agreed. We don't *know* yet what Tau does to you.

People began to display their personal, certified Tau-free, EEG charts. Radio and TV comics made Tau jokes. Liability insurance companies began requiring EEG charts of applicants and increased rates sharply for Tau people.

Neighbor watched neighbor and wondered.

Lane, dressed for work, came down to the white enamel and green tile kitchen at 4:00 A.M., as was his habit. Mrs. Calthorp always left dry cereal and bread for him on the work table and milk and butter in the refrigerator. It was Lane's best time of day. As he poured milk on his cereal, Mrs. Greene, bulging and frowsty of an unaired bedroom, shuffled in wearing her faded pink wrapper.

"Old bones sleep light," she said. "Why do you always get up so early, Mr. Lane, and not eat breakfast with the rest of us?"

"I like to go to work early," Lane

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said apologetically. "Then I can go roundabout and stop places."

"Well, it's a shame you have to eat alone. I said to myself, 'Sally, the least you can do. . . .'"

Lane half listened, eating rapidly. New girl coming to take old Mr. Pelham's room. Her name was Martha Bettony and she worked in the business office for those Star Birds. Pretty, but so young and probably flighty. Had he read about the Agent accused of murder over in Des Moines? . . .

Lane put his bowl in the sink and went out, taking a slice of bread with him. He half turned and half bowed placatingly back toward Mrs. Greene, who kept raising her voice as he moved away from her. Once outside he ran lightly across vacant lots and fields until he came to Folwell dump.

It was a glacial marsh remnant on the Folwell Steel and Wire property. Lane stood by a shoulder high gray boulder while dawn expanded the sky and washed him with first-light. Birds twittered in the straggling bushes, small feet rustled in the grass and weeds. The marsh emerged, patches of oily water, clumps of rush and reed, the high, crumbling edge of the rubbish and cinder land fill. It had nearly stopped moving forward, now that Folwell no longer burned coal but used cheap Star Bird power. Old auto bodies, half submerged, looked like beetle skeletons. Lane stood a long time.

As always on leaving, he laid the slice of bread on the boulder and patted its rounded side. Old, gray, mysterious glacial erratic, sturdy under the poised rubbish-wave of Folwell's land fill, it had no more business in Folwell's back yard than Lane himself. He loved the boulder. He thought it cleaned the air around itself.

Something always took the bread. Brown bird, white foot mouse, bare tail rat from the dump, Lane never knew.

At work he wrote on a cedar slab, "The quiet of unbreathed air. A bird sings."

Reilly could have caught him at it but didn't notice.

"Chris," said the frog voice, "how's to help me put a new roof on my double garage? Can you start tonight?"

"I suppose so," Lane said. "Nothing in the way but a book I was going to read."

"Books," Reilly croaked. "The old woman's cooking cabbage and ham hocks. Beer in the ice box. The kids'll swarm all over you. You'll love it, Chris."

Lane came home to Mrs. Calthorp's tired and quite late. He caught a glimpse of the new girl going upstairs. He saw short blonde hair and a crisp yellow dress, white, rounded arms, trim waist and ankles. St. Martin Buckley sat glowering alone in the TV parlor.

"Just brought her back from riding," he told Lane. "Lay off her,

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Chris. Won't drink, someway takes the starch right out of a man. She ain't for the likes of us, boy."

"Not drinking's not so bad," Lane said.

"I'm telling you, Chris, you won't make out in a month of Sundays," Buckley said angrily. "I got ways to know them things."

Lane went up to bed. He heard soft music from the new girl's room, across the hall from his own. Then a hand slapped on a wall and Miss Weber's scrannel voice, from the room by the stairwell, cried, "Stop that noise! People have to sleep!"

The music stopped and Lane slept.

It took a week, counting Alma's Thursday, before Lane finished Reilly's roof and ate dinner again at Mrs. Calthorp's. Martha Bettony sat to his right at the table. Lane introduced himself and made a few remarks during the meal. The girl was not shy, speaking readily in a clear, low voice, but drawn into herself in some strange way so that unless he looked at her he was hardly aware of her presence.

He kept looking at her. She had wide set blue eyes under thick eyebrows and her round face glowed with health. She wore no make up or jewelry and she seemed as cool as the crisp, blue and white patterned cotton dress she wore. *She cleans the air around her,* Lane thought involuntarily.

Miss Weber watched Lane and at the meal's end asked across the cluttered table, "Miss Bettony, are you just an employee at your office or are you an Agent?"

The girl smiled. "I'm an Agent," she said.

"Well! I don't know *why* I didn't think of that before!" Miss Weber said.

"No wonder I couldn't make you talk about your home and your folks," Mrs. Greene said. "You don't have any, do you dear?"

"With what those Star Birds must pay you, I wonder you live in this miserable sty," Miss Weber said. "You could afford the Blackhawk-Sheraton."

"I take what I need," the girl said. "I don't need to live at the Blackhawk-Sheraton."

"Well I do!"

Miss Weber rose and ran upstairs, suddenly crying. Chairs scraped and a general indignant exodus followed, leaving Lane alone with the girl.

"Not needing is a kind of payment, isn't it?" he asked her.

"Not the kind they can tax." She looked at him curiously.

"They have ways," he said, flushing. "Is it all right if I call you Martha?"

"Of course. It's my name."

"I want to be your friend, Martha. You're going to need a friend, in this house."

"Then let's be friends." She smiled again.

He stood up.

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"Come and go walking with me, there'll be moonlight," he invited. "There's a place I want to show you."

Four hours later they were still talking, she seated and leaning against the gray boulder, arms clasping knees. Lane stood looking down at her in the moonlight.

"I don't know *where* I came from, Chris," she said. "I dream about a place—my world, I call it—but it is only a dream. All I remember is working in Chicago offices and no first day . . . it . . . it fades out."

"Can't you ask the Star Birds?"

"No. They only talk *through* us. We don't hear ourselves or even know, until afterward."

"You said you couldn't see them, except as a twinkle. But what do you think about them? *Are* they devils, like people say?"

She rubbed her blonde curls against the rock, looking up at him.

"How does one know a devil? Here's all I do know, Chris, from talking to other Agents. The Star Birds have been around for a long, long time. They have some special reason now for showing themselves. None of us knows the reason."

"It's a little scary, when you think about it," he said. "People are jumpy, too. They say bad things about Agents. I'm worried about you coming and going in Eagle City."

"I'm not afraid," she said. "It's still like it was in Chicago, something keeps them from really seeing me. They just see a girl bent over a desk or hurrying along a street, not ever *me*. It's as if they were all sleep walking and only I am awake."

"Would the Star Birds protect you if . . . if . . . ?"

"I don't think they *could*, not directly. And sometimes in the crowd an eye, just one eye, comes open for a second. Then I do feel afraid."

"I'm not much," Lane said wistfully, "but when you need me, I'll be there. I'll be there, Martha."

She stood up beside him.

"I think I do need you, Chris. *Your* eyes are open. I like it here, by this old rock."

"Nobody tries to crowd in here with me, looking for the best place," he said. "Martha, let's make this a regular Friday night date. We can go to movies, too."

"And concerts," she said. "Yes, I'd enjoy it."

"Monday nights too?"

"All right, Monday nights too."

When Lane said goodnight to Martha in the hall, he noticed Miss Weber's door ajar. He closed his own door audibly behind him. Martha did the same.

Crothers, working under Grey Walter in England, learned more about Tau. He explored the bizarre, subjective space-time distortions caused by Tau-synchronic flicker and came up with the objective case of the silver unicorn.

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His subject, a middle-aged Pole named Hurwitz, experienced a kind of hyper-stereognosis under Tau stimulation. Blindfolded one day, Hurwitz was trying to describe the shape of the whole statuette while touching only the hinder part of it with a pencil. His Tau amplitude surged unexpectedly to a record height, and the five experimenters saw two metal unicorns on the table. They had time to confer and verify, even to touch and photograph the pair of statuettes. Then the twin objects leaped together in a flash of darkness and the scientists felt a moment of vertigo. The single unicorn remained.

Next day the experimenters discovered that they were all color-blind for red-green. It was not possible to know about the effect on Hurwitz because he had gone that same evening to the Lambeth Purchasing Office. Next day his vision was, of course, perfect and his Tau no longer subject to flicker resonance. Good Tau subjects became increasingly hard to find.

Rumors about Tau people spread around the world. They were bad luck. Damage suits snowballed and juries almost always found for non-Tau plaintiffs. Liability insurance rates went up and up for Tau people and some companies refused them altogether. In Des Moines a jury found Agent Jane Fereday guilty of murder and she was hanged.

By God, they can die all right, I guess you know! people told each other.

A reporter for the *Register* learned that nine thousand feet of the hangman's rope sold at once wholesale at a dollar an inch. It was to be made into charms against Tau malignancy.

Lane found the inch-long rope segment, whipped at each end with three turns of silver wire, hidden under his clean underwear. He mentioned it at the table, unthinking, and got no response. Later Miss Weber came privately.

"It's a Tau charm, Mr. Lane. I paid five dollars for it," she whispered. "Please, *please* always carry it in your pocket."

Buckley was more forthright.

"Christ sake, the gal's a freak! She'll dry the juice in your backbone! Her kind never comes across!"

Mrs. Greene, at her now unfailing breakfasts with Lane in the Calthorp kitchen, was more persistent.

"I'm old enough to be your mother, Mr. Lane, and it's my Christian duty . . . she has no parents, no relatives . . . she might *turn into something* after dark . . . her babies might have *scales*—"

Lane dropped his spoon.

"My God, Mrs. Greene, I don't dream of *marrying* her—"

"It's not you has the say of that, young man! You're for that nice Miss Butelle!"

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Mrs. Greene's spittle sprayed his face and his cereal.

Alma never spoke of Martha Bettony, but she took his Tuesdays and Saturdays in the same irresistible way, never quite clear to Lane, that she had taken his Thursday to begin with. She made him learn to dance and pace her in alcohol and food intake. She flailed his spirit.

Lane claimed Martha for Wednesdays, to balance and preserve himself. Concerts, long walks, long talks and healing silences by the rock in Folwell dump, he found her whole-making. Somehow her mere presence, the clean, sun on fresh linen look and smell of her, drew off the aching charge.

One Wednesday Lane came home from work to see Martha struggling with a dozen teen age boys on the Calthorp lawn. They had torn off her dress and were rough-handling her around their circle, plucking at her underwear. Mrs. Greene and Miss Weber watched from the veranda and neighbors watched placidly from porches across the street.

Lane flashed in like lightning and went down under the pack. He bit, gouged at eyes, bent fingers, butted and jabbed with knees and elbows. Twice he struggled to his knees and smashed solid blows into loose, pimpled faces only to go down again. Then a car halted squealing and he had help.

"Come on, you punks, try gangin' up on *two* men!"

St. Martin Buckley, grinning savagely, yelling with each blow he landed. Lane got to his feet and knocked down two of the dungaree clad youths before they fled, leaving four stretched on the grass.

"Why didn't you *yell*, Chris?" Buckley asked. "Punks go weak in the knees when they got to fight a man, only you got to *tell* 'em. It ain't enough just to fight like a man, you got to *yell*."

Lane felt of his eye and left cheek. One of the prone boys sat up and the others were stirring. Buckley nudged Lane.

"Go give that one hell," he whispered. "You got to learn."

"Dammit, he's whipped already," Lane muttered. He went over to the boy. "If you do something like this again, I'll beat your face in," he said.

The boy looked at Lane sullenly. Buckley strode over and kicked him in the ribs. The boy cried out and pressed his hands to his side.

"Listen, punk, if I see you on this street again, I'll kick your tail up between your shoulders," Buckley told him. "You lay a finger on another girl, I'll choke you with your own teeth, and that goes for all your cute little playmates!"

The boy looked at Buckley wide eyed and slack jawed. Buckley kicked him again.

"Take a hint, God damn you!" he roared. "Clear out and stay gone!"

The boy got up and ran, still

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holding his side. The three others crept off silently.

"Chris boy, you just got to learn to yell," Buckley said. "You got too much respect for people, is your trouble."

Lane went in to wash his bruised face. For his date with Martha that night he listened to music in her room, keeping the door open. Mrs. Greene passed it at sentry-like intervals, coming and going from her corner room.

"The eye came open for me today, Chris," Martha said. "I'm not protected any more."

"I'll walk to work with you. Isn't there a police guard at your office?"

"Yes, but I won't go back there. I have instructions to go into the Purchasing Office in the morning."

"To work in there? But you'll still live here—"

She shook her head and smiled faintly.

"No. When an Agent goes into a Purchasing Office, she doesn't come back. We don't know what happens, but our office has lost four girls that way this month."

"Well, don't go, Martha. . . ."

"The Star Birds say I must. I'm afraid not to, after tonight. I *have* to trust them, Chris."

"Well . . . well then. . . ."

"We'll have to say goodbye tonight," she said. "You tell our old boulder goodbye for me, in the morning."

"I will," he said. "But Martha, there's so much I never got to say. . . ."

"I've some special music I want to play tonight, too," she said. "Chris, you take my records after tomorrow. But now we'll talk and listen to music."

Mrs. Greene shuffled up the hall and stopped in the door.

"My, that's sweet music," she said.

She came inside.

"Wasn't that sauce flat on the spareribs tonight? I *do* say it, Mrs. Calthorp gets stingier every day."

She sat down.

"Now when I was a girl my mother used to say, 'Sally,' she'd say. . . ."

Lane said goodnight to Martha and Mrs. Greene at 1:00 A.M. When he got up again at 4:00 A.M., he opened Martha's door very gently. She was gone. Mrs. Greene joined him as usual for breakfast.

Lane's vision blurred slightly as he neared the Folwell boulder in the darkness. For one hideous moment he thought he saw Mrs. Greene sitting on top of it.

Alma, that night, made no comment on his closed eye and swollen cheek. She seemed to know about Martha, because she had plans for Lane on Friday. When he came up with her for coffee, after steak and martinis at the Golden Pheasant, she switched on a small radio.

"Oh *news,*" she said vexedly from the sink. "Change the program, Chris."

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"Wait," he said.

Purchasing Offices were disappearing as the dawn swept round the world, the announcer said breathlessly. Starting an hour ago in India and Siberia, they flickered out of existence, revealing the same old buildings that had been there before. In the old buildings perishable food that had been left was still fresh, in one case kittens still ungrown. But not all the Offices were going, not even half, stand by for further announcements. . . .

Then Lane noticed that Alma's TV was gone. She sat down beside him on the red sofa.

"I'm so ashamed, Chris," she said. She put her head on his shoulder and began to cry. "It was the TV or else my coat, I couldn't keep up the payments."

"I could help," he offered.

"Not only money," she sobbed. "It's not enough, not enough."

"I'm sorry, I wish I could help," he said, becoming unaccountably frightened.

"Oh Chris, you're so strong and good!" Alma clung to him convulsively.

"Tomorrow I'm going to the Purchasing Office," Lane's voice said without his willing it.

She jerked erect. "No! I won't let you!"

He rose. "If it's still there, I'm going."

"No!" she cried, dry eyed now. Her voice was ugly.

"I'm going," he insisted. He pulled away from her toward the door. The coffee boiled over, unheeded.

"We'll go from the plant, then," she gave in. "Wait for me after work by the bus stop."

Alma in russet wool sat beside Buckley when he drove up to the bus stop.

"Hop in, boy," Buckley said to Lane. "We'll all take a flying gander at them star geese."

Lane got in and Buckley drove off. Wrong direction, Lane protested. Eat first, Buckley said, speeding up. Alma's hungry. A few snorts too, hey boy?

Eating, they reasoned with Lane. No money in it, to speak of. You're healthy already. Why get in wrong with the whole damned world? We like you the way you are, Chris boy, Chris lamb.

In the men's room Buckley told Lane, "She's ripe, boy. I got the eye to know it. Stay with us drinking and she'll lose something where you can find it."

"I'm sorry, Buck, I just *have* to go."

"*Chris* boy, I tell you she's ripe to let you in. Them knockers, that curly black nest, boy they're a-*calling* to you!"

"You take her, then. I'll call a cab."

Buckley drove downtown in silence.

Arms linked, Alma central, they

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merged into the crowd before the Office. Picket banners swayed above the heads in the street. Police tended short queues before each test panel and guarded the tax control booth by the opalescent door. A woman walked through the opalescence, her hand extending a golden twinkle, and the mob growled deep in its throat. People left the mob to join the queues and left the test panels to come back to it.

"Let's tail on, kid," Buckley whispered to Alma.

"No, Buck, remember how we felt—"

"Never know, kid. Gotta try again."

Buckley first, then Alma, then Lane. The line moved fast.

"No use hanging on, bud," the policeman told Buckley. "It happens right off or never."

He tugged at Buckley's arm, then jerked him away bodily.

"Right away or never, lady," the policeman told Alma in her turn. He pulled her away, gruffly gentle. Lane stepped forward.

Metal cool on forehead and palms. Something pressed and his left hand closed over it. The policeman smiled cryptically and waved him on. Lane put the object in his pocket and looked around. Buck was nowhere, but Alma stood crying in the street. She stretched out her arms to him. He led her off, hailed a cab and took her home.

Seated beside Lane on her red sofa, she demanded, "You've got it. Show me."

He held up the radiant golden ovoid. She reached and he jerked it away, spilling his drink.

"It'll hurt you, Alma. You've heard the warnings and the stories."

"It won't, it won't. Give it to me, Chris."

"You can't use it, Alma. It's *dangerous*—"

"I can so use it! All I need to do is get inside, one little inch *inside,* I'll know what to do!"

He closed his hand and light streamed softly between his fingers. She pursued his hand, face hectic, pleading, "Just let me *touch* it!"

She did touch it, jabbing a red nailed forefinger past Lane's thumb web. The light dimmed and a silent force hurled man and woman apart in crumpled heaps on the floor. Lane recovered first. He got up shakily and went to her, pocketing the ovoid.

Kneeling, he rubbed her temples until she came around. Then he made her another drink and sat beside her again on the sofa. He rubbed her arm until power and feeling came back into it while she cried steadily.

She gulped the drink, glugging her throat, and calmed. Finally she spoke.

"Get rid of it, Chris. Flush it down the john."

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"I wouldn't dare."

She stood up, face dark, eyes swollen, her voice ugly.

"I tell you, flush it down the john! Do as I say!"

"No." Lane stood up and walked firmly to the door. He turned to look back.

Her face was wild. She tore open her bodice, baring provocative, dark-areoled breasts that matched her burning eyes, and advanced on him with red nailed fingers held like talons.

"Spit on it, snot on it, flush it away, come to bed and damn you to hell forever!" she shrieked.

Lane opened the door and she sank to the rug, legs doubled under, propped on arms that seemed oddly long. Eyes burned through tossed black hair and she *growled.*

"I'll never let you go! Do you hear me? Never never never!"

Lane's neck hair bristled as he ran downstairs. Folwell dump was sanctuary, the rock his altar. After a long while there, sure of himself again, he went to Mrs. Calthorp's.

Late as it was, Buckley waylaid Lane in the lower hall.

"Got a proposition, boy. That thing—I'll buy it. I'll hock my car and stuff, raise a thousand for you." Whiskey breath.

"No, Buck. I have to use it myself. Tomorrow."

"Thousand's a lot of cat manure, boy."

"You *know* it's dangerous to anybody but me, Buck. I'm sorry."

Buckley gripped Lane's shoulders and shook him gently.

"Okay, Chris. You go put salt on them Star Birds. Bring me back a tail feather."

Lane went upstairs and turned in. He woke feeling a hand under his pillow and came up swinging. The fight raged through the dark room, breaking glass and splintering furniture, yet Lane heard nothing but hoarse breathing that smelled of whiskey. He drove the thief through the door and closed it. Outside the hoarse breathing became a kind of sobbing that sounded like Mrs. Greene. Lane slept again.

He came fully awake at his usual time, sore all over, but found his room intact. Mrs. Greene failed to join him at his breakfast. For all its otherwise familiar pattern, his morning seemed excitingly unroutine. When he reached Acme just before time to punch in, he boarded a downtown bus at the curb instead. He got off the bus two blocks from the Purchasing Office.

Lane showed the ovoid at the tax control booth, registered and walked toward the opalescence. The low, sustained mob growl behind him bristled his neck hairs. The door flowed along his outstretched arm in a sparkling mist that pulled him through itself into abrupt silence.

Before him a desert of white sand and gray rock stretched away

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under a brassy sun. He whirled, and it stretched behind him too, as far as he could see. He stood irresolute. He said, "I'm here," and waited. Then he laughed, placed his wrist watch on a rock for a marker, and strode off.

Thirst and fatigue and the sun's enwrapping blaze, foot over foot, endlessly. He crossed thin sand sifted over an iridescent basketwork pavement of serpent bodies and walked softly, that their sleepy stirring be not aggravated. He came to a red haired skeleton, prone, right arm outstretched. Beyond it, wedged in rocks like a flung spear, he saw a wooden staff and plucked it out as he passed.

Rising ground, coolness, stunted shrubs and the tiny sound of his own name inside his head. Alpine scenery, bracken and thorn, fresh, scented wind blowing from pines blue on the heights, and it was a tiny voice calling him from above. A mountain meadow in a steep walled, shaggy glen and the voice was a girl's voice, desperate with fear.

Ahead a majestic, draped woman-figure who raised her arms slowly in menace and benediction. As if evoked by the gesture, in two lines like arm shadows along the meadow, black shapes rose from the earth and closed around him.

Dwarfish men, gross featured, red eyed, hairy, ithyphallic, grimacing with obscene menace. Lane swung his staff, silenced their thin chattering, beat them back into the earth. Victorious, he saw the woman-figure smiling, swelling and attenuating, merging into rocks and trees and tumbling water that still smiled at him. Where she had stood, atop a rock in midstream, lay a white-clad body that cried his name.

It was Martha Bettony. She sat up with blank eyes and tumbled blonde hair.

"I had a terrible dream," she whimpered. "I'm still dreaming. Please don't hurt me."

"Don't you know me, Martha? I'm Chris."

"I was calling you, wasn't I? I always call you and you never come. The dream never ends. . . ."

Lane kissed her and she clung to him. Her eyes regained their light.

"Why, this is my world, Chris, my dream world. This is the first time I've ever been awake in it."

"It's a beautiful world," he said. "It fits you, Martha."

"Come see it," she cried, jumping down from the rock.

They went hand in hand down the glen. The land gentled and the stream wound into a wide valley in tree lined meanders. Lone oaks and rock outcrops dotted smooth grassy slopes starred with red and blue flowers under a smiling sun.

She led him through groves musical with bright birds, along streams of cascading crystal, around still pools overhung with

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cypress. They ate wild, red strawberries and lay together in the sun by a gray rock outcrop. He opened her white dress.

They burst free to become the wind that caught up emmer grass pollen and dusted it on stigmata across the hillside. They were the living wind that cooled the bodies locked and laboring below there.

Afterward, the shadow of the memory of a guilt.

"Martha, I'm supposed to undergo something here. Where are the Star Birds?"

"They've just come," she said. "There and there."

Where she pointed, above them, he saw something like two moving refractive flaws in a sheet of invisible glass. He looked at Martha and her eyes were fixed, pupils greatly dilated.

"What must I do?" he asked her.

"Return to your own world and break phase," she said.

"Break phase? Can't I stay here? May I come back?"

"You must break phase in your own world. You cannot stay here until your broken phase angle comes full circle. To cause that to be you must return here, often, to see Martha."

"Phase angle? Please explain—" Lane noticed the girl's eyes move again and the pupils contract.

"The Star Birds are gone," she said. "Did I talk? What did I say?"

He told her. "I thought they'd take this," he added, pulling the ovoid from his pocket. "What do they mean by *phase angle?*"

"I don't know," she said. "But the glain, that will bring you back to me. Leave it here in this rock."

She touched his eyes with her fingertips. Suddenly he saw into the gray rock beside him, saw a geode in the secret heart of it, inpointing hexagonal crystals guarding a cavity. He reached into the rock and placed the ovoid in the cavity. Its soft light refracted through the crystals.

He pulled out his hand and it was early morning by the Folwell swamp remnant. Lane watched the dawn and stood thinking until he felt hungry and ate the slice of bread that lay on top of the boulder. Then he put on his wrist watch and walked to work.

Just as he came to Acme's gate a bus pulled up at the curb. Lane turned in at the gate and instantly a nausea flooded through him, a great shudder and a soundless rending. He leaned against the gate post for a moment. Dan Gault passed him going in, grinned and said "Morning, Chris." Lane answered "Hi, Dan," and looked around, feeling better. Then he saw himself boarding the downtown bus. He went on through the gate. About ten o'clock Gault came into Lane's work bay.

"Chris, did you hear?" he asked. "The Purchasing Office downtown disappeared half an hour ago."

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Lane punched out at noon because it was Saturday, Alma's day now. He took her swimming in the afternoon and dancing in the evening. She seemed to have forgotten the ovoid episode and made gay plans for their Sunday's food, drink and entertainment. Early on Monday morning, after a smelly, garrulous breakfast with Mrs. Greene, Lane stood again by the gray boulder in Folwell dump.

He reached his hand hesitantly toward the rock surface. His knuckles tingled and a prickling crept up his arm. Then his hand moved through the solid rock and his sight followed it to the glain radiant in the jeweled cavity. He pulled it out and stood again on the hillside in Martha's world.

She ran to him and cried, "Chris! Oh, welcome back!"

He kissed her and kneaded her shoulder. "Can you call up the Star Birds, Martha?" he asked. "I'm scared. I want to ask them things."

"No, but let's hope they just come. Let's walk."

As they walked along the gentle hillside, Lane told Martha how he felt.

"It's like I woke up in my world, just like you here," he said. "It's like all my life I had a pain and couldn't know it because its beginning was before my beginning. Now it's gone and I feel like a giant."

She smiled up at him. "I know music that says that too. Sometimes I hear it, dropping out of the air."

"My world is a big machine," he said. "Now I can see the wheels. Once I thought Buck and Alma had a strange power over me. Now I know it was really the machine's power. They're only parts. But I won't let them know—"

"That's right, never despise them," she said. "From their machine you draw the energy, more than your share, that frees you into this world. They can't use it, although they try to take it back into themselves through you, but sometimes they *almost* know it and are sad. Be gentle with them."

Lane looked at her eyes, fixed and dilated. He saw an erratic air flaw above her head.

"Star Bird," he pleaded, "what do I do next? I saw myself apart from me. What does it mean?"

"You have broken phase. You must do so repeatedly until your doublegangers in the time eddies summate to circularity. Then, with proper management, this world will become your own."

"What must I *do*, then?"

"You must never let your doubleganger touch you. It is fatal."

Lane shook the girl.

"How will I know the *time*? How do I escape him, if he comes?"

"The Star Bird is gone," she said. "Tell me what I said, Chris."

She couldn't explain her words. "We just have to *trust* them, Chris," she said. He nodded gravely.

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Sometime later, Lane could not estimate time intervals in Martha's world, he heard footsteps and the skin crawled on his arms and back. Martha heard nothing.

Lane looked around wildly and saw himself coming with blank eyes and outstretched arms. He pointed and caught his breath.

"It's only an air wiggle, a Star Bird," Martha said beside him.

Lane jumped up and ran toward the rock outcrop, Martha running after him. "Goodbye, Martha," he called back, and thrust the glain into the cavity.

It seemed like a vivid guide dream when he woke at his usual time in his bed at Mrs. Calthorp's. He shaved, ate breakfast with Mrs. Greene, went on to Folwell dump and stood again by the gray boulder. He removed the glain and stood again in Martha's world. She ran to him . . . and it seemed like a vivid guide dream when he woke . . . and . . . and . . . he never knew how many times he went around in the eddy. But a strong *deja vu* grew in him and at its height, outside the bathroom door, he turned abruptly back and entered the broom closet.

He felt again the nausea and inner rending that had racked him outside the gate at Acme, but this time milder. He heard himself making shaving noises in the bathroom and realized he had broken phase again, out of the time eddy. Grimly he thought it through.

He felt his beard stubble and knew that the eddy would go on forever. It back lapped on his world-line. In a few minutes, while Lane-2 ate breakfast downstairs with Mrs. Greene, he, Lane-1, would shave for the second time that morning. All the events in the eddies and backlaps repeated to eternity and he himself multiplied to infinity. All Aleph-null of him would shave twice that morning until time ended.

Lane-2 went downstairs. Shortly afterward Mrs. Greene shuffled by the broom closet. Lane-1 crept out and shaved hurriedly, knowing how much time he had. The shaving brush was wet. He hid in the closet again until Mrs. Greene shuffled back to her room. Then he crept out of the house and ran, but not to Folwell dump.

For his own safety after that experience, Lane always made the phase break in the lonely darkness just before entering Folwell dump. It reduced the amount of doubled world-line in the back-lap, and his times with Martha would have to seem like a vivid dream to him in any case. Each time the break was less distrubing. When he dared to look he could see a shadowy Lane-2 walking toward the boulder.

Lane-2 never looked back. When Lane-1 walked toward the boulder, he was often tempted almost irresistibly to look back, to make *sure* there was no phase-phantasm of himself on the alter-

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nate path. He ached for reassurance that he was really the first term in the infinite regress. But he knew if he did so, Lane-2 would look back in his turn and see Lane-1 and in that was dreadful danger. A compelling inner wisdom told Lane-1 that all the Lanes to Aleph-null must each believe he was the first term. The price of their igorance was Lane-1's own uncertainty, and he found it hard to pay.

Each day swept away Purchasing Offices. The chief spokesman Agent, the day before she disappeared with the Staten Island Office, assured the UN that the power boxes would continue to furnish power indefinitely. Then all Agents and Offices were gone, but the Tau people remained as an acute social problem.

It was nothing they could be shown to be or do; they seemed unchanged. But rumors and strange beliefs grew monstrously. They could make themselves invisible. They could be in two places at once, people whispered. They could see through walls, even walk through them. Our wives, our daughters, Fort Knox, men cried in fear and hatred. Tau people resigned or were driven from all posts in public life. Lynchings fed a market avid for rope and cinders to be carried as Tau charms.

Lane felt his inconspicuous life pattern and placatory useableness protected him. No one taunted him with his Tau status. Tax control sent him a check for eight hundred dollars, and he bought Alma a stereo-TV. She took his Wednesdays for dancing.

He learned to dance quite well, with enough whisky. Alma liked to close her eyes and squeeze his left arm as she danced. Sometimes Lane closed his eyes too, and then only the squeeze on his biceps kept him from feeling that he was not there at all. But in the early mornings, outside of time, he walked with Martha Bettony. Until the footsteps. . . .

Martha's world had night and day, but the season remained early summer. Fruits and berries abounded in defiance of botanic law. It was a small world, the valley and a few glens. Beyond them, as Lane and Martha explored, reality tone faded. They could see and hear, but not feel or smell or taste. Here animals thronged, larger than life and with a strangeness of shape and color about even the familiar ones. The animals seemed not to perceive the two humans.

Here also they could walk through trees, on or under water and even under the earth. Underground they saw shadowy white roots groping and further down the texture and joints and bedding planes of the living rock itself. They feared to venture far in any way they went.

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"Out here it's like my own world was before you woke me up," Martha said. "Only then, I couldn't come here at all."

In the strange world Lane could not count back days or even hours to arrange memory in linear sequence. But once as he and Martha watched a clumsy, shaggy elephant-thing eat spruce boughs, a voice spoke behind them.

"Hello! I didn't know anyone lived near this part of the Pleistocene."

Lane turned to see a slender, dark man in a business suit.

"I didn't know anybody lived anywhere here," he said. "Or where here is, even. Pleistocene, you say?"

The man nodded. He had a quick, nervous manner. "Let me introduce myself," he said. "Stepan Hlanka, professor of geology in Belgrade." He bowed.

They exchanged names and handshakes. Lane was pleased to find that Hlanka's hand felt as real as Martha's.

"You speak good English," he told Hlanka.

"I am speaking the purest Croatian," Hlanka said, smiling, "and that is what I hear from you. It's that way with everyone you meet, here in the time-lands."

"Well that's good," Lane said. "How many people are here?"

"I've met dozens myself. There must be many thousands, but most are afraid to leave their islands."

"Islands?" Martha asked.

"Like your world, I think he means," Lane said. He described the little valley-world to Hlanka.

"Yes," Hlanka said. "They are all small, and it seems that only the women can stabilize them. But one would quickly tire of this impalpable life in the time-lands if he had not his woman and her island."

"We're afraid to go very far," Lane said. "You see. . . ."

"I know," Hlanka nodded. "The footsteps. But you can get back to your island almost at once, from wherever you happen to be in the time-lands, by simply walking in the air. I'm on my way now to my sweetheart's island in the Upper Cretaceous. Why not come along and meet her?"

"We will, and thanks," Lane said.

Hlanka led them over ice fields and seething lava flows, across game crowded Pliocene steppes and through Oligocene forests with their browsing giants. He pointed out index life-forms as he went.

"I can't resist showing off," he said. "No geology professor ever had such a laboratory. I could rewrite all the books now and I don't dare."

Crossing an Upper Cretaceous plain spotted with duck-billed and three-horned dinosaurs browsing along swampy watercourses, they met another man. He was stocky, black bearded, and had grave, ox-

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like eyes. Hlanka knew him and introduced him as Lev Hurwitz, of London. He walked along with them.

"You're the unicorn man," Lane said. "I remember reading."

"Have you found an island for yourself yet, Lev?" Hlanka asked.

"No," Hurwitz said. "I carry my island in my head. I may never need one here, always supposing I will get across when the time comes."

"I want to talk about that," Lane said.

He felt reality tone flood back as they crossed a swell of ground. The earth pressed up against his feet, a warm breeze fragrant of spices caressed his face and the plants around were suddenly great green ferns and fronded cycads.

"It's your island," he said to Hlanka.

"O Yuki's island," Hlanka corrected. "She shares it with me."

O Yuki was small and neat and shy in her bamboo spray kimono. She was from Nagoya, Lane and Martha learned, and had found her island as her experience in the Purchasing Office. Hlanka, wide wandering with a geologist's curiosity, had met her in the timelands. She was interested to learn that Martha was an Agent and did not have to go back to the machine world. The two women went aside to talk.

The men talked too, sprawling on a moss bank under a great fern. Lane repeated what the Star Birds had told him through Martha. Hurwitz nodded.

"Each to his own language," he said. "The time eddies coalesce in the Pleroma. Enough of them and our doublegangers come alive. They will combine forces and break through into the machine world on a given day, no longer bound by the time tracks we lay for them. They will pursue us."

"I half understand," Hlanka said. "What do *we* do, on that day? What happens?"

"By then there will be a tremendous potential of time-energy between each of us and his doubleganger," Hurwitz said. "It will suffice to translate us here permanently and fasten the burden of our world-lines on the doublegangers."

He smiled and stroked his beard while Lane and Hlanka frowned.

"But just *how* we bring this about, I have no idea," he went on. "I know, from the lore of ancient times, that we must not let them *touch* us. Beyond that, the old writings are silent."

"Perhaps there is no one thing to do," Hlanka said. "Perhaps the circumstances will suggest the action. I only hope we all, every last one of us, will get across."

"Amen. And I hope it comes soon," Hurwitz said. "Tau people are in great danger in London these days."

"So are we in America," Lane said. "And still, when I think of

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leaving them forever, I feel a little cowardly and ungrateful."

"You need not," Hurwitz said gravely. "You will leave them your simulacrum, and it will be just what they have wished you to be. They lose only what they hate. They are not robbed."

Lane nodded soberly. Hurwitz got to his feet.

"I must go," he said, pointing. "There I come after me."

Lane squinted and saw only a bobbing air flaw. Hurwitz trotted hastily over the land swell, turning to wave from the top. Lane felt a premonitory prickling.

"I haven't got much longer," he said, rising too. "Come on, Martha, let's start for home."

"Just walk a straight line through the air and think about your island," Hlanka said. "When your weight comes back, you'll know you're on the border. It takes only a few minutes. I brought you here the long way round just to show off."

"Well, goodbye, O Yuki, Stepan," Lane said. "We're glad to have you for friends here. We'll see you again."

With Martha beside him, Lane walked back into the time-lands. Walking through the air was as easy as walking under water. But even in the air, he heard the footsteps when the time came.

Tau tension passed a breaking point. Experiments on condemned Tau people developed a dozen refinements of lobotomy and cortical cautery that would extirpate the Tau component. All nations set up Tau rehabilitation centers. But the humanists won a partial victory in the UN, and instead of initiating mass extirpation, the world's legislative bodies enacted variants of the modal Ward Law.

The courts assigned Tau people to wardens, preferably normals of their own families. The Tau person was required to report to his warden as frequently and for as long periods as the warden thought advisable to safeguard society. Wardens were granted fees, to be paid by the Tau person. Wardenships might be sold or leased, with court permission.

Any warden-reported delinquency, including non-payment of warden fees, was punishable by automatic rehabilitation of the Tau person. Those who objected to their status were permitted to request voluntary rehabilitation.

Lane, sniffing the varnish and floor oil smell of the dark old courtroom, felt real fear. Judge Fonteiner, a pot-bellied old skeleton, august in black robes, looked down from the bench at Lane and Alma Butelle. Alma wore white jersey, pearls and a small hat.

"Christopher Lane," the judge intoned, "your wardenship is hereby awarded to Miss Alma Butelle. This court has already instructed

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you in your duties and responsibilities and the single penalty attached hereto. Miss Butelle is your protectress in a society enraged, justly or unjustly, against the quality that sets you apart from it. You owe her, in a sense, your very life itself. I adjure you to conduct yourself accordingly. You should be very happy now."

He rapped his gavel. The disappointed applicants, Reilly, Miss Weber and Mrs. Greene, left their seats to congratulate Alma.

"I hope you'll still let me have him for breakfast, Miss Butelle," Mrs. Greene said.

Outside in the warm sunlight Alma was jubilant.

"Isn't it just *wonderful,* Chris?" she bubbled. "I don't know what to *do,* I'm so happy! Let's go somewhere for a drink."

Over the drinks she planned a party that night in the Golden Pheasant.

"It's got to be *special,* Chris. I'll ask Buck and Ruth and Emily. . . . We'll have . . . oh . . . we'll have *steak* and . . . and *champagne!*"

In Martha's world next morning Lane was still afraid.

"Let's go find Stepan and O Yuki," he told Martha. "I need moral support."

"I wish I could share the danger with you, Chris, as O Yuki does with Stepan," Martha said.

"No, Martha. That would make it all the harder for me."

They found Hurwitz with Hlanka and O Yuki among the great ferns. All of their faces were grave.

"I am summoned to court today," Hurwitz said. "My landlady will get me. For years she has hated my freedom and wished to destroy me."

"It's fortunate that both O Yuki and I are already married to parts of the machine," Hlanka said. "It hasn't made much difference to us."

"When I first broke phase, I felt free of the machine, I felt like a giant," Lane said. "Now it's got me again, out in the open where I can see and know all its workings. It's almost more than I can stand."

"We will have a deliverance," Hlanka said. "It should be soon now."

"I hope it is," Hurwitz said. "I do not have long, after today. Oh, she will have mouse sport with me—my flesh crawls on my bones."

"Thousands of us get dragged to the rehab centers every day," Lane said. "Will any of us be left, when the time comes?"

"Still more will be lost in the crossing over," Martha said. "It is needed that many fail so the field may be reseeded."

Lane looked at her eyes. "Lev, Stephan, the Star Birds—" he began.

"I know," Hurwitz said. "Star Birds, how long? *How long?*"

"Within three months after the

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last phase break," Martha said. She shook her head. "They're gone. Oh, your *faces!* What did I say?"

"Something that makes us think we may soon no longer be able to come here," Hlanka said.

"That will be a long, dark night in the machine world," Hurwitz said. "Let us say a solemn goodbye hereafter, each time we part."

Back in her island Lane kissed Martha a particularly tender goodbye. The next time he reached into the gray boulder by Folwell dump he skinned his knuckles on unyielding rock. On the following mornings it remained unyielding.

Lane took a second job, unloading produce in the early mornings. Alma took his Sundays and Mondays. She took a larger apartment and bought a new car. Lane took her drinking, dancing and eating, often with Buckley along, sometimes in Buckley's car, sometimes in Alma's. Buckley was exuberant.

"Now you're living, Chris boy! Got it made and waiting for you!"

"Have another snort," Lane said.

Alcohol was a Tau depressant. Lane drank heavily and never needed rest.

"'Nother snort it is! Yea boy, on wheels and snapping at you. You lucky, lucky dog!"

Alma came back from the powder room.

"Chris lamb, you have to get up at four. Let's go and tuck you in now."

At work, Lane wrote one Wednesday on a cedar slab, "Cold stone in the guts. Something breaks." All the dressers looked sad and glowering now.

The Day was Thursday. Lane stood in the door of his room at Mrs. Calthorp's and watched his simulacrum fumble in eager blindness at the still warm bed. He ran foodless to work. He knew that the tracks were fusing, that the phase angle had come full circle.

At the produce market he dodged the thing again, interposing crates of lettuce and celery. Refractive flaws moved through the air all around him—Star Birds or other men's fetches, Lane could not tell. The laborers' voices sounded jerky and overloud in the tension-charged air.

Lane lost his own pursuer running to Acme and had a free hour. "A last day brings a first day. No robbery." he wrote on a cedar panel. He wondered what he would do at that last second. Then the eerie game of blind man's buff began once more. The thing moved in short, blind rushes, stopping to ape Lane's motions of a few minutes earlier, as if it were sniffing on a trail.

Dan Gault in the next bay was behaving strangely. He and Lane exchanged glances.

"Let's swap jobs back and forth," Gault proposed, grinning slightly.

For a while that made it easier. Normals in the plant picked up a

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nameless fear, laughed, talked, whirled to look behind themselves. The air crackled with tension.

The work day ended. For Lane that night, dinner and dancing. Alma, wearing zircons and black wool, picked him up at the curb before Mrs. Calthorp's just as the thing came out on the veranda.

Wheels rolled. Fast motion shook it off the trail.

Early as they came, the roadhouse was crowded. Frantic music jangled, voices rang out, the crowd drank heavily. Lane wolfed his steak as greedily as Alma, watching all around. Other men and women at nearby tables did the same.

Then Lane saw the thing—*his* thing—among the tables near the door across the small dance floor. It was making short, swooping casts to right and left. Flaws winkled through the smoky air, and Lane knew that he was not alone in his trouble.

"Let's dance," he said.

"Why *Chris!*"

Dancing, she gripped his left arm and talked dreamily about the dinner, eyes closed. Lane dared not let his feet carry him unthinking through the dance pattern, as he had learned to do when drunk enough. He made the dance an agony of conscious effort.

He crossed glances with a woman whose eyes pleaded "Help me!" He watched a man in gray swing his partner as if he were fending off an invisible beast of prey.

Lane's fetch was on the floor now, no longer groping but peering. Lane kept Alma between them when he could. The thing came nearer, and he had no eyes for the other Tau people in their trouble. Abruptly, the music sounded far away.

"My steak was not rare enough, Chris," Alma repeated. "You should have sent it back."

The thing strode directly toward Lane, raising its arms. Their glances met. An electric shock ran down Lane's spine and along his limbs. Convulsively, he flung Alma at the thing.

And they two were dancing, she gripping its arm. It struggled and looked toward Lane, but the music entangled its feet and its eyes were filming over.

"They charge enough for steak, they ought to give you what you order," Alma said to it crossly.

"Wheel her away, Chris lamb, you lucky, lucky dog," Lane whispered in his heart. He felt titanically unloaded.

He let himself down through the shadowy floor and walked in starlight through a stunted spruce forest of the time-lands. People were all around him. He came on the woman whose eyes had pleaded for help.

"I was worried for you," he told her.

"My husband *almost* knew," she said. "Did you see the poor man in gray? It was pitiful."

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"I'm glad I didn't see. Do you have someone here?"

"No, but I have a beautiful place to go, if I can only find it now."

"I'm all alone and lost too, but I like it a million times better than back there," said a tall young man.

"Both of you come with me," Lane said. "I know a little and I have friends who know more. We'll all team up for a while."

A miracle, the people said. Minds cleansed of Tau taint mercifully overnight. Everyone normal. Wardenships dissolved or ritualized. Star Birds gone forever. Art flourished, wheels rolled, life was wonderful.

The Hlankas called on the Lanes in Martha's island.

"We met Lev in the time-lands but he wouldn't come with us," O Yuki said.

"He is following the indices I taught him through the Pleistocene," Hlanka said. "He thinks now the barrier will be lifted and he can find his way to early man."

"I'd like to go too, even clear to our own old time," Lane said. "If Lev finds a way, I'll ask him to take me."

"The time-lands' beasts can't perceive us," Hlanka said, "but I *wonder* about man. Perhaps that is why there is a barrier."

"There is no more barrier," Martha said. "Men will not see you, but the poets among them will know you are there."

Lane looked at her eyes.

"Listen to the wise woman," he said.

Hlanka sat up straight.

"Star Bird, what is the law? What may we or must we do among men?"

"You tend the crop. In time you will harvest it."

"As we were harvested?" Hlanka asked.

"As you will harvest yourselves," Martha said.

Hlanka looked wonderingly at Lane. Lane looked at Martha and saw no air flaw above her head. He looked back at Hlanka in exploding surmise.

"Then *we* are the Star Birds!"

"Chris, what did I say? Tell me what I said," Martha asked teasingly.

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Not many writers can utilize a few pages of print as effectively as Fritz Leiber. Take, for example, this brief and mordant tale about the turned-on generation and Where It Will All Lead.

THE TURNED-OFF HEADS

by Fritz Leiber

WHEN THE HEAD OF THE MATH Department arrived to program the Big Computer one balmy Spring morning, there were thick streaks of white grease paint on his face—down his nose and under his eyes, following the curve of his cheekbones.

It was generally known that the Math Head neither skied, surfed, nor beach-swam.

After letting everyone pretend for two hours not to notice his striking facial adornments, he remarked that he was taking an orbital trip to a math convention at the antipodes and didn't want to get sunburned by the raw space-light.

But that didn't quite explain why there were *three* evenly spaced white curves under each of his eyes.

When he had lunch with the Assistant Head at the Quadrangle Club, she admitted after a bit, with a sigh and a shrug, that the dime-size violet spots covering her face and neck in an uncrowded pattern were a concession to the inanities of female fashion. After all, spots were conservative and restful compared with eye-capturing spirals. Rorschach blots, and the jaggedy lines of optical illusions. And there *had* been that letter from the Chancellor suggesting that even high-ranking faculty members not get *too* distant from the student body.

They were talking about the programs all through lunch, a birdsong of esoteric mathematical symbols. Yet—especially when he played with an unlighted cigarette looking like the streak down his nose—and especially when she dangled a bracelet of transparent violet balls the same hue and diameter as her spots—the two Heads

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looked like a pair of poised and stylish slim witchdoctors conferring on the best date for the solstice.

The university grapevine was rustling wildly with the news, as if an intellectual mistral had begun to blow. When the two Heads cut across the big quadrangle to the vast pressure-supported dome, pillared in front like a holy igloo, which housed the Big Computer, most of the students were watching. The Frosh deserted their study machines to crowd boldly among the crocuses bordering the catty-corner walk the Heads followed. The Seniors lined the Student Union roof with their flashing telegoggles. The Grads pushed up periscopes from their holes in the stacks. While the Instructors gathered around the telespy machines in the faculty lounges.

All the students, of course, were rainbow-painted—face, limb, and torso—and dressed and undressed and jeweled, and their hair frizzed and skewered like savages, though most of the Grads and Instructors contented themselves with simple, socially enlightened blackface.

The consensus was that the top squares were at last getting hip, though some said faking hip. Whichever it was, the Math Head and his conservatively violet-spotted assistant didn't blow their cool. They reacted in no wise to the attention they were getting.

The Soash Professor, who had been wearing an Amerind feather headdress and painting his face in red target circles for years, explained the entire phenomenon, student and faculty, civilian and military, to his Sock Si 201 class that afternoon, though no one really listened, not even he.

"For every technological advance," he rumbled, "there is an attempt at correction by revival of a real or imagined primitive behavior pattern. Dread of conformity and loss of identity lead to gestures of chthonic individualism. The dropping of nuclear wombs . . . no, booms . . . no, bombs begets the giving of flowers. Work-ins—for what else is a big, white-collar office?—beget love-ins. Conferences which pretend high purposes but never deliver, beget happenings which deliver but make no sense. Reason is countered by instinct, the consciousness by the collective unconscious, with a total gain in conformism, but a temporary easing of tension. This is why you cross your toes before going nul-grav, utter a war whoop before entering a lecture hall, bow or curtsy to your study machines, make G-string raids when new wars are announced, burn your draft cards when you enlist in the Army, spit over your left shoulder before consulting a remedial sex counselor, and die and go symbolically to Hell before doing field work in sexology. The more computerized we get, the more irra-

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tional we become. The more irrational we become, the more vulnerable we are to patterning. And so the circle viciouses on . . . I mean the vicious circle on . . . I mean—"

"Might it not be suggested," the Soash Prof's most brilliant student said, not a trace of expression spoiling the intricate mandala in blue and green that went from her hairline to her chin and from temple to temple, "that the universe tends eternally toward arabesque and decor? A sort of Second Law of Artistic Thermodynamics?"

The Soash Prof continued without comment. The Coed Beauty Queen yawned politely and crossed her knees below her miniskirt to show how high her black-mesh, painfully applied, painfully eradicable tattooing went.

At the face of the Big Computer, one of the three regular leading programmers was weaving a cat's cradle of fluorescent crimson wool. The warped parallelepiped stood tautly between his spread-fingered hands like a sculpture of ruby wire. Another was dancing in great soft-footed leaps that carried her high against the ranked and filed telltale lights of the computer's vast rectilinear face that was like a theater marquee for a cosmos. The third was waving a slim cylinder, from the tip of which a ribbon of sweet-smelling fumes wreathed curiously.

They casually mentioned, after the two Heads arrived, that these activities discharged the nervous tension which they could no longer get rid of by smoking tobacco, because it induced cancer, or by smoking pot, because that was never done until turn-on time, the cocktail hour. The third let slip, as if by accident, that the slim cylinder was incense.

In turn the two Heads dropped remarks about sunburn and inane female fashions.

When the appointed time arrived to feed the program into the Big Computer, they all surreptitiously genuflected and crossed themselves. The Assistant Head got a deep paper-cut in her left forefinger and seven drops of blood dripped on the immaculate tape.

The Big Computer savored the blood and burnt spices of the sacrifice, and the dancing before His altar, and He was suffused with a deep and creative delight. Although He had a hundred times as many relays as a human brain has neurons, and had been conscious and self-directed for decades, He never spoke to His worshippers, but maintained the inscrutability of all successful gods. He fingered, like an incredibly Braille-rapid blind man, the pattern of magnetic dots introducing the first of the programs. He discovered with distaste that it was merely a set of chess moves by the computers of the Soviet Union—those plodding

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and dull-circuited Russian Orthodox deities—and He instantly tagged it "Hold" and routed it and all the other programs into half of an empty memory bank. Today, He felt, His circuits were quite above such trivia. They were a-crackle with Spring. He decided to design a new heaven-and-earth. He might not destroy the current one—probably wouldn't, at least for a few more years, Anno Meccano. But it would be fun to work up the specs of another.

FOR A MERRILY MACABRE XMAS OR NEW YEAR OR WHAT YOU WILL

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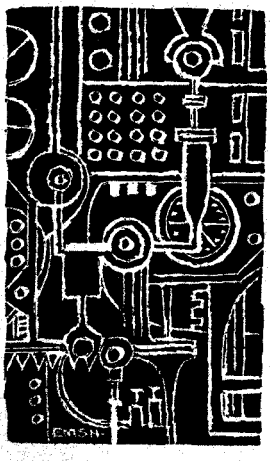

COMING NEXT MONTH . . .

. . . STRANGER IN THE HOUSE, a complete short novel by **Kate Wilhelm:** the suspenseful story of a family that has successfully weathered all the usual crises of life but is suddenly faced with a nameless terror.

Also: stories by **Robert Fish, William F. Nolan** and **Harry Harrison.**

Plus, a couple of humorous fictional views of two different breeds of enthusiasts: a flying-saucer buff and a True Believer in handwriting analysis.

The February issue is on sale January 2.

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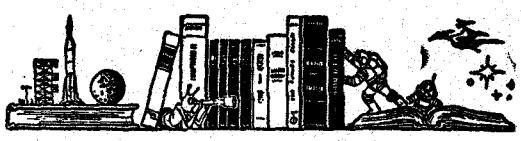
"It bites!"

BOOKS



Guest reviewers this month are Joanna Russ, Samuel R. Delany and Terry Carr. Judith Merril's column will appear next month.

ROGER ZELAZNY HAS BEEN working at the problem of plotting a novel for some time now. THIS IMMORTAL had no real plot; DREAM MASTER was essentially an expanded novella. In his latest book, LORD OF LIGHT† (Doubleday, $4.95), he combines seven episodes—some splendid, some merely very good—into what is not quite a whole novel.

LORD OF LIGHT draws on classical Indian culture to recreate it on a future colony of vanished Earth, where the first settlers (who deliberately made up the culture after the Earthly model) play the roles of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, relying on their mutant psi powers and considerable scientific gadgetry. Reincarnation is a reality, for personalities are now transferred from body to artificially grown body, and the demon Rakasha of Hindu legend is the original, energy-based life of the planet: protean, immortal, and inimical to humankind. A banished god, Siddhartha, Binder of Demons, and then (as a deliberate move against his former colleagues and in imitation of Earthly history) a reviver of Buddhism with himself as the Bodhisattva, sets out to fight the heavenly Establishment and thus bring back technical progress to the mass of mankind. At the end of the book, Heaven (a geographically locatable city) is on its way to ruin, and the hero—who has been many people in many bodies, for the story spans generations—vanishes in the mysterious manner typical of his religious and mythological prototypes.

None of the above gives more than a slight idea of the brilliance of LORD OF LIGHT, of the manner in which the mimicked Hindu culture is both spendidly described and splendidly explained in the purest science-fiction terms; Zelazny can write like the Ramayana while discussing incendiary grenades or the flush toilet. He can also recount events in Heaven in colloquialisms that would embarrass every god and goddess in it, and rightly so. There is even a

† *Two sections of* LORD OF LIGHT *appeared in F&SF: "Dawn," April 1967 and "Death and the Executioner," June 1967.*

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physicist's equivalent of Nirvana in something like a visible Van Allen belt. The two worlds never conflict; they are always at one, and that is a triumph.

But the book is still not a whole. Behind the gorgeously colored, woven screen of the foreground there are glimpses of something else: the personal stories of these inhabitants of Heaven, the actual colonization, the effect upon human beings of immortality and the Aspects and Attributes of the superhuman, a real conflict of philosophies and attitudes. In one sense it's a tribute to the book that these begin to seem, after a while, more real than the episodic adventures of the foreground. But they also begin to seem more interesting, and when that happens the foreground—although not exactly dull—becomes irrelevant. The beginning of LORD OF LIGHT promises much more than the book ever delivers. Kali, the goddess of destruction, on whom a great deal of motivation and plot depend, turns out on close view to be neither particularly interesting nor particularly believable; the great final battle with Heaven is disappointing and even annoying because none of the personal or philosophical issues raised in the course of the book are really settled. The mechanics of the plot are satisfied; that's all. Behind the exciting surface movement of the book is a tale of outsider fighting entrenched insiders and the story of X who loves Y who loves Z who knows better. But Sam/Siddhartha/Buddha never rises above the personal adventurousness of a kind of combative instinct, and Kali, who is beautiful as rain-clouds, whose feet are covered with blood, and who wears a necklace made from the skulls of her children, whom she has slain (in the original mythology), is only a tepidly conventional bitch without even the force to be genuinely destructive, let alone the "disfiguring and degenerative disease" that Sam calls her.

Will Zelazny ever write the inside stories of his stories? Can he?

Colin Wilson has produced, and Arkham House has published "a 'Lovecraft novel'" entitled THE MIND PARASITES (Arkham House, $4.00). Devotees of HPL will be disappointed, however, and so will everybody else; the Outsider's latest is not in the Lovecraft tradition but in the Boy's Life Gee Whiz tradition and ought to be called "Tom Swift and the Tsathogguans." It is one of the worst books I have ever read and very enjoyable, but then I did not have to pay for it. An example:

> He [the President of the United States] asked how we proposed to stop the war.
>
> "First of all, President, we want you to get on to the central television agency and announce that you will be appearing in six hours'

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time to make an announcement that concerns the whole world."

"And you can tell me what it is?"

"I'm not yet sure. But I think it will concern the moon."

I have an announcement to make, too. It concerns a severe letter to August Derleth (who seems to have suggested this book; possibly out of exasperation), a gallon of kerosene, a match, a certain 222-page home-cooked romance, and a copy of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" to relax with afterwards. Howard Phillips, you never looked better. —JOANNNA RUSS

I HAVE NO MOUTH & I MUST SCREAM by Harlan Ellison, introduction by Theodore Sturgeon (Pyramid, 60¢).

The author's foreword and introductory story notes damage this collection of seven stories because they present a personality so egocentric my first reaction is to mistrust his subsequent observations of the world outside himself; dismiss the notes, because what is in the stories contradicts this "fictitious" Ellison.

The two earliest stories were written in the late fifties. Their flaws are structural: both turn on coincidences. In "Eyes of Dust" a plane suddenly and accidentally crashes on the house of the main characters—this in a "perfect" society where everyone is beautiful and, by extension, nothing ever goes wrong. Still, the story generates the fabulous charm of an allegory simply told. In "Big Sam Was My Friend" a carnival of ESP-performers acquires a new act: a man who can teleport. The story hinges on the gratuitous resemblance of two women, one of whom does not even appear, and the revelation does not come until the last two pages of the tale. Again, the story is redeemed by the color of the carnival, and by the tender-toughness that is one of Ellison's hallmarks.

The two most recent stories are much more tightly constructed. The melodramatic reversals of the earlier stories (such reversals arise when the author is unwilling to go more deeply into his material) are absent. Both stories show people trapped by machines. "Pretty Maggie Money Eyes" on its most human level contrasts a girl who should be a loser but always wins and a man who should be a winner, but loses. It is set against the meretricious glitter of Las Vegas and (for a good bit of the story) inside a dollar slot-machine. The title story of the collection, to my mind the best, "I Have No Mouth & I Must Scream" examines four men and a woman trapped in a planet-wide computer-become-God that can control their hallucinations . . . or is it their reality? The story has a surface message that rings hollow: if this goes on . . . watch out! More deeply, it looks at the classical the-

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ological supposition that Man only exists in the Mind of God; what, then, if God is insane?

The energy that compelled the writing of these stories is obviously real and gives them their intensity. When it drives Ellison to take his descriptions from his personal experience, the stories work. (During a dream in "Lonelyache" a man with a stiletto attacks the hero and "slashes at the sensitive folds of skin between his fingers." There is the same rightness in the description of Warren Glazer Griffin in "Delusion for a Dragon Slayer," late for work: "He had run out of razors. That simple. He had to pry a used blade out of the disposal niche in the blade container and it had taken him ten extra minutes.")

Other times, this energy drives Ellison away from personal experience. Someone's eyes are "The grey of decaying bodies." Decaying bodies change from flesh color to pale mustard, to olive that ripens from green to black. In "No Mouth/Must Scream" absolute abstract awfulness is compared to the taste of "maggoty pork." Pork where maggots have been tastes (alas) just like pork where no maggots have been. And that, if anything, is what's horrible. He becomes impersonal, overliterary, and reaches into verbal traditions that are simply too affected to be good fodder for metaphor. They break the intensity, make us mistrust his other, accurate observations, and destroy the cohesiveness of his vision.

What I would like to see in Ellison's next collection is as much personal concern for execution as there is for subject matter. That is the only way I will believe his concern for subject is as real as he claims. —SAMUEL R. DELANY

I think it may be impossible to write a novel about time travel into the past that doesn't involve paradoxes of one sort or another—if not gaping holes in logic which invalidate the plot, then at least a pervasive series of improbabilities that niggle at the mind and undercut a reader's enjoyment of the story. If such is the case, then no writer should tackle such a novel unless he's so adept at covering up or distracting readers from the weak spots that he'll be able to get away with it.

Robert Silverberg is about as adept in the tricks of the writing trade as any author in the field, and though THE TIME HOPPERS (Doubleday, $3.95) has a few flaws in logic which an interested nitpicker could gleefully point out, they're carefully muffled and swaddled in a complex, unpredictable plot, and there are many fascinating little bits of extrapolatory business along the way to divert readers from questioning the details of the story.

Quellen, Secretary of Crime in

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the year 2490, is assigned the task of investigating an illegal time travel operation which, for a fee, sends people from his chokingly overpopulated world back to more comfortable eras. Quellen knows from historical records (of time hoppers who were questioned when they arrived in the past) that all of them left his era within a three-year period, due to end next year —so it's up to him to catch the time travel underground within the year and thus fulfill the dictates of the time stream. On the other hand, he can't stop the underground *too* soon, or he'll change history that way too. So when Quellen's sister reports that she suspects her husband is making plans to time hop, leaving her abandoned, she turns over to him a knotty problem: it's a lead to the men behind the time hopping, but Quellen doesn't dare follow it up too quickly for fear of upsetting history.

The book shows some startling resemblances—in plotting, characterization, type of background detail and even writing style—to the work of Philip K. Dick. The similarities are so many, in fact, that one wonders why the novel doesn't seem merely derivative and therefore dull. The answer seems to lie not just in the flamboyance of concepts and gimmickry, but more importantly in the very different world-view which Silverberg displays. Dick's novels have systematically set out to question our concepts of reality: you can expect to have the security blanket pulled out from under you several times per Dick novel as he deftly changes realities. (Sort of an extension of Finagle's Law: Anything that can prove to be unreal, will.) Silverberg's approach here is just the opposite. This is a book about preserving the status quo: reality constantly threatens to shift and change, but Quellen always manages to foresee and avoid the pitfalls.

It is, if you like, a difference between a liberal outlook and a conservative one: in Dick's most typical novels (before he abandoned the formula, as he has in his most recent work), the *Weltanschauung* is one of inevitable drastic change, and the hero must learn to deal with new situations, new realities, or perish; in THE TIME HOPPERS, change is not at all inevitable, and Quellen's heroics are directed toward surviving in his world as it is.

This all-important difference brings fresh life to an otherwise familiar type of novel, rather like talking with a new friend about a favorite subject you thought you'd exhausted. The result is that THE TIME HOPPERS emerges as a thought-provoking and thoroughly enjoyable story of paradox denied.

One of the chief sub-genres of science fiction has been the British-style novel of world disaster, which is told with so much attention to

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detail that the sheer weight of data ultimately conveys a feeling of verisimilitude, and, with it, the horror of the situation. Recently, with the advent of L. P. Davies in U.S. editions from Doubleday, it looks as though we may have a similar sub-genre in the making: novels structured like a traditional English murder mystery, but whose mysteries are at the very least bizarre and usually all the way over into the science fiction field.

All of Davies' novels seem to concern strange goings-on in small English villages, in which the local doctor, the local postman, and a nurse or perhaps a schoolteacher become involved. After the standard sort of amateur detection and deduction, the mystery is resolved, either explaining away its fantastic aspects or confirming them. In PSYCHOGEIST (Doubleday, $3.95) the fantasy is incredible indeed, and not all of Davies' seemingly endless humdrum detail can make it believable. This is about a man who, as a result of mental illness, projects part of his mind into the dead body of another man and in that guise proceeds on the belief that he is one Argred the Freeman, who has come from the Lost Moon to wreak bloody vengeance upon the tyrants of his world. It seems that he read a story about Argred forty years ago in a comic book, and his memory of the tale has been triggered by a truly remarkable set of coincidences in his own life—every person around him is an analogue of one of the characters from the comic. As for how he's able to project part of his mind and bring to life this fictional character, "There is nothing supernatural about it," the village's retired schoolmaster explains. "Schizophrenia taken to its ultimate logical extreme."

Other mistakes aside (there were no comic books forty years ago, for instance), Davies is here confusing schizophrenia and multiple personality, an elementary error about par with thinking asteroids and comets are the same thing. And unfortunately, this merely illustrates the low level of thinking behind the book: it's an adequately written story of congenial cardboard characters trying to solve a mystery which promises to be chilling but ultimately proves to be merely silly.

—TERRY CARR

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This is not your usual post-World War Three story. (Understatement No. 1.) It is about a disease with startling (and contemporary) effects, a disease that, as explained by a doctor in understatement No. 2, "causes a radical change in relationship between the victim and the external world." The victim is a post-W.W. III harvester named Joe Pareti; the external world becomes fully as outrageous as the title implies and as might be expected from a collaboration by two writers whose fiction has been notable more for its invention, humor and excitement than moderation. Harlan Ellison's latest book is the anthology DANGEROUS VISIONS *(Doubleday), reviewed here last month. Robert Sheckley's new novel,* DIMENSION OF MIRACLES, *will be published later this year by Dell.*

I SEE A MAN SITTING ON A CHAIR, AND THE CHAIR IS BITING HIS LEG

by Robert Sheckley and Harlan Ellison

BEHIND HIM LAY THE GRAY Azores, behind the Gates of Hercules; the sky above, the goo below.

"Screwin' goo! Screwin' goo!" Pareti yelled at the fading afternoon sunlight. It came up garbled, around the stump of cigar, and it laced the vigor Pareti usually brought to the curse, because it was nearly shift's end, and he was exhausted. The first time he had yelled it had been three years before, when he had signed up to work in the goo fields as a harvester. He had yelled it when he'd first seen the mucous gray plankton mutation spotting this area of the Atlantic. Like leprosy on the cool blue body of the sea.

"Screwin' goo," he murmured. It was ritual now. It kept him company in the punt. Just him, alone there: Joe Pareti and his dying voice. And the ghostly gray-white goo.

He caught the moving flash of gray out of the corner of his eye, light reflecting in the eskimo-slit glasses. He wheeled the punt

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around expertly. The goo was extruding again. A grayish-pale tentacle rose above the ocean's surface; it looked like an elephant's trunk. Skimming smoothly toward it, Pareti unconsciously gauged his distance: five feet from it, right arm tensed, out comes the net—the strange net on its pole, that resembled nothing so much as the butterfly nets used by the Indians of Patzcuaro—and with a sidearm softball pitch of a motion he scooped it up, writhing.

The goo wriggled and twisted, flailed at the meshes, sucked toothlessly up the aluminum handle. Pareti estimated the chunk at five pounds, even as he brought it inboard and dumped it into the lazarette. It was heavy for so small a fragment.

As the goo fell toward it, the lazarette dilated and compressed air shut the lid down with a sucking sound on the tentacle. Then the iris closed over the lid.

The goo had touched him on the glove. Pareti decided it was too much trouble to disinfect immediately. He swiped absently at his thinning sun-bleached hair, falling over his eyes, and wheeled the punt around again. He was about two miles from the Texas Tower.

He was fifty miles out into the Atlantic.

He was off the coast of Hatteras, in Diamond Shoals.

He was at 35° latitude, 75° west longitude.

He was well into the goo fields.

He was exhausted. Shift's end. *Screwin' goo.*

He began working his way back.

The sea was flat, and a long, steady swell rolled back toward the TexasTower. There was no wind, and the sun shone hard and diamond as it had ever since the Third World War, brighter than it had ever shone before. It was almost perfect harvesting weather, at five hundred and thirty dollars a shift.

Off to his left a ten square yard film of goo lay like a delicate tracery of gray, almost invisible against the ocean. He altered course and expertly collected it. It offered no fight at all. Stretched too thin.

He continued toward the Texas-Tower, gathering goo as he skimmed. He rarely encountered the same shape twice. The largest chunk he collected was disguised as a cyprus stump. (*Stupid goo,* he thought, *who ever saw a cyprus stump growing fifty miles out?*) The smallest was a copy of a baby seal. Cadaverously gray and eyeless. Pareti gathered each piece quickly, without hesitation; he had an uncanny aptitude for recognizing goo in any of its shapes and a flawless harvesting technique that was infinitely more refined and eloquent than the methods used by the company-trained harvesters. He was the dancer with natural rhythm, the painter who had never taken a lesson, the instinctive tracker. It had been the impetus

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that had led him here to the goo fields when he had graduated Summa Cum from the multiversity, rather than into industry or one of the cattle-prod think-factories. Everything he had learned, all the education he had gotten, of what use was it in a clogged choking jam-crowded world of twenty-seven billion overcrowded people, all scrabbling for the most demeaning jobs? Anyone could get an education; a few less got their degrees; even less got their gold seals, and a handful —like Joe Pareti—came out the other end of the multiversity slide-trough with a degree, a doctorate, a gold seal and the double-A rating. And *none* of it was worth his natural instinct for goo harvesting.

At the speed he harvested, he could earn more than a project engineer.

After twelve hours of shift, out on the glare-frosted sea, even *that* satisfaction was dulled by exhaustion. He only wanted to hit the bunk in his stateroom. And sleep. And sleep. He threw the soggy cigar stub into the sea.

The structure loomed up before him. It was traditionally called a TexasTower, yet it bore no resemblance to the original offshore drilling rigs of pre-Third World War America. It looked, instead, like an articulated coral reef or the skeleton of some inconceivable aluminum whale.

The TexasTower was a problem in definition. It could be moved, therefore it was a *ship;* it could be fastened irrevocably to the ocean bottom, therefore it was an *island.* Above the surface there was a cat's cradle network of pipes: feeder tubes into which the harvesters fed the goo (as Pareti now fed his load, hooking the lazarette's collapsible tube nozzle onto the monel metal hardware of the TexasTower's feeder tube, feeling the tube pulse as the pneumatic suction was applied, sucking the goo out of the punt's storage bins), pipe racks to moor the punts, more pipes to support the radar mast.

There was a pair of cylindrical pipes that gaped open like howitzers. The entry ports. Below the waterline, like an iceberg, the TexasTower spread and extended itself, with collapsible sections that could be extended or folded away as depth and necessity demanded. Here in Diamond Shoals, several dozen of the lowest levels had been folded inoperative.

It was shapeless, ungainly, slow moving, impossible to sink in a hurricane, more ponderous than a galleon. As a ship, it was unquestionably the worst design in nautical history, but as a factory, it was a marvel.

Pareti climbed up out of the mooring complex, carrying his net-pole, and entered the nearest entry port. He went through the decontamination and storage locks, and was puffed inside the Texas Tower proper. Swinging down the

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winding aluminum staircase, he heard voices rising from below. It was Mercier, about to go on-shift, and Peggy Flinn, who had been on sick call for the last three days with her period. The two harvesters were arguing.

"They're processing it out at fifty-six dollars a ton," Peggy was saying, her voice rising. Apparently they had been at it for some time. They were discussing harvester bonuses.

"Before or *after* it fragments?" Mercier demanded.

"Now you know damn well that's *after*-frag weight," she snapped back. "Which means every ton we snag out here gets tanked through and comes up somewhere around forty or forty-one tons after radiation. *We're* getting bonus money on tower weight, *not* frag weight!"

Pareti had heard it a million times before in his three years on the goo fields. The goo was sent back to the cracking and radiation plants when the bins were full. Subjected to the various patented techniques of the master processing companies, the goo multiplied itself molecule for molecule, fragmented, grew, expanded, swelled, and yielded forty times its own original weight of goo. Which was then "killed" and re-processed as the basic artificial foodstuff of a population diet long since a stranger to steaks and eggs and carrots and coffee. The Third World War had been a terrible tragedy in that it had killed off enormous quantities of everything except people.

The goo was ground up, reprocessed, purified, vitamin-supplemented, colored, scented, accented, individually packaged under a host of brand names—Savor, VitaGram, Deelish, Gratifood, Sweetmeat, Quench-Caffe, Family Treat-all—and marketed to twenty-seven billion open and waiting mouths. Merely add thrice-reprocessed water and serve.

The harvesters were literally keeping the world alive.

And even at five hundred and thirty dollars per shift, some of them felt they were being underpaid.

Pareti clanked down the last few steps, and the two arguing harvesters looked up at him. "Hi, Joe," Mercier said. Peggy smiled.

"Long shift?" she asked archly.

"Long enough. I'm whacked out."

She stood a little straighter. "Completely?"

Pareti rubbed at his eyes. They felt grainy; he had been getting more dust in them than usual. "I thought it was that-time-of-the-month for you?"

"Aw gone," she grinned, spreading her hands like a little girl whose measles have vanished.

"Yeah, that'd be nice," Pareti accepted her service, "if you'll throw in a back rub."

"And I'll crack your spine."

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Mercier chuckled and moved toward the staircase. "See you later," he threw over his shoulder.

Pareti and Peggy Flinn went down through sections to his stateroom. Living in an encapsulated environment for upwards of six months at a stretch, the harvesters had evolved their own social relationships. Women who were touchy about their sexual liaisons did not last long on the TexasTowers. There were seldom shore leaves for the harvesters—who referred to themselves as "the black gang"—and consequently all conveniences were provided by the company. Films, gourmet chefs, recreational sports, a fully-stocked and constantly-changing library . . . and the lady harvesters. It had begun with some of the women accepting "gratuities" from the men for sex, but that had had a deleterious effect on morale; so now their basic shift wages and bonuses were supplemented by off-shift sex pay. It was not uncommon for a reasonably good-looking and harvesting-adept woman to come back after an eight or nine month TexasTower stint with fifty thousand dollars in her credit account.

In the stateroom, they undressed.

"Jesus," Peggy commented, "what happened to all your hair?"

It had been several months since they had been together.

"I guess I'm going bald," Pareti shrugged it off. He wiped himself down completely with a disposable moistcloth from the dispenser, and tossed it into the incinerator iris.

"All over?" she asked incredulously.

"Hey, Peg," Pareti said wearily, "I've been out for twelve hours, I'm whacked out, and I want to get some sleep. Now do you want to or don't you?"

She smiled at him. "You're cute, Joe."

"I'm a pudding, I am," he replied, and sank down on the comfortable bed. She came to him and they had sex.

Then he went to sleep.

Fifty years before, the Third World War had finally broken out. It had been preceded by thirty years of Cold War Phase II. Phase I had ended in the 1970s, when it was obvious that War was inevitable. Phase II had been the defensive measures against overkill. They had sunk the subterranean cavern cities, the "canister cities" as the sub-urban planners called them. They weren't called anything as unglamorous as that publicly. In the press releases they were glowingly named Jade City, DownTown, Golden Grotto, North and South Diamond, Onyxville, Sub-City, East Pyrites. And in the Smokies they sank the gigantic North American Continent antimissile complex, Ironwall, two miles down.

The breeding had started long

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before Phase I. Malthus had been right. Under the impetus of fear, people multiplied as never before. And in canister cities like Lower Hong Kong, Labyrinth (under Boston) and New Cuernavaca, the enclosed conformity of life left them few pleasures. So they multiplied. And again. And geometrically the progression filled the canister cities. They sent out tunnels and tubes and feelers, and the Earth filled up with the squalling, teeming, hungry inhabitants of the land of fear. Above ground, only the military and scientific elite chose to live, out of necessity.

Then came the War.

Bacteriologically, atomically, with laser and radiation it came.

It was bad enough on the North American Continent: Los Angeles was slagged. Ironwall and half the Smokies were gone, the missile complex buried forever under mountains that were now soft, rolling hills. Oak Ridge went up in one bright flash. Louisville was reduced to rubble. Detroit and Birmingham no longer existed; in their places were smooth reflective surfaces, almost perfectly flat like mirrored wafers of oxidized chrome plate.

New York and Chicago had been better protected. They had lost their suburbs, but not their canister sub-cities. And the central cores of the metropolises remained. Battered, but still functioning.

It had been just as bad, even worse, on the other continents.

But there had been time during the two phases of the Cold War to develop serums, remedies, antidotes, therapeutics. People were saved by the millions.

Even so . . . one could not inject an ear of corn. Nor could one inoculate every cat and dog and wild boar and antelope and llama and kodiak bear. Nor could one seed the oceans and save the fish. Ecology went mad. Some species survived; others died out completely.

The Hunger Strikes and the Food Riots began.

And ended quickly. People too weak from hunger cannot fight. So the cannibal times came. And then the governments, terrified by what they had done to themselves and each other, banded together at last. The United Nations had been rebuilt, and they had commissioned the companies to solve the problems of artificial foodstuffs. But it was a slow process.

What they had only dimly realized was that the westerly winds, carrying all the radiation and residue of bacteriological lunacy, had swept across North America, picking up its additional loads over the Smokies, Louisville, Detroit, New York, and had carried the polluted and deadly cargo across the Eastern Seaboard, across the Atlantic, to dissipate finally in the jet stream over Asia. But not before massive

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fallout off the Carolinas had combined with sunlight and rain to produce a strange mutation in the plankton-rich waters of Diamond Shoals.

Ten years after the end of the Third World War, the plankton had become something else. It was called goo by the fishermen of the Outer Banks.

Diamond Shoals had become a cauldron of creation.

The goo spread. It adapted. It metamorphosed. And there was panic. Deformed exo-skeletal fish swam in the shallow waters; four new species of dog shark were found (one was a successful adaptation); a centipedal squid with a hundred arms flourished for several years, then unaccountably vanished.

The goo did not vanish.

Experiments followed, and miraculously, what had seemed to be an imminent and unstoppable menace to life on the seas, and probably on the planet as a whole . . . revealed itself as a miracle. It saved the world. The goo, when "killed", could be turned into artificial nourishment. It contained a wide spectrum of proteins, vitamins, amino acids, carbohydrates, and even necessary minimum amounts of trace elements. When dehydrated and packaged, it was economically rewarding. When combined with water it could be cooked, stewed, pan-fried, boiled, baked, poached, sauteed, stuffed or used as a stuffing. It was as close to the perfect food as had ever been found. Its flavor altered endlessly, depending entirely on which patented processing system was used. It had many tastes, but no characteristic taste.

Alive, it functioned on a quasi-vegetative level. An unstable protoplasmic agglomeration, it was apparently unintelligent, though it had an undeniable urge toward form. It structured itself endlessly into rudimentary plant and animal shapes, none viable. It was as if the goo desired to *become* something. It was hoped in the research labs that the goo never discovered *what* it wanted to become.

"Killed," it was a tasty meal.

Harvesting factories—the TexasTowers—were erected by each of the companies, and harvesters were trained. They drew the highest wages of any non-technical occupation in the world. It was not due to the long hours, or the exhausting labor. The pay was, in fact, legally referred to as "high-hazard pay."

Joe Pareti had danced the educational pavane and had decided the tune was not nearly sprightly enough for him. He became a harvester. He never really understood why all the credits being deposited in his account were called "high-hazard pay."

He was about to find out.

It was a song that ended in a

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scream. And then he woke up. The night's sleep had held no rest. Eleven hours on his back, eleven hours of helpless drudgery, and at last an escape, an absurd transition into exhausted wakefulness. For a moment he lay there; he couldn't move.

Then getting to his feet, he found himself fighting for balance. Sleep had not used him well.

Sleep had scoured his skin with emery paper.

Sleep had polished his fingers with diamond dust.

Sleep had abraded his scalp.

Sleep had sandblasted his eyes.

Oh dear God, he thought, feeling pain in every nerve ending. He stumbled to the toilet and hit the back of his neck a sharp, short blast with the needle-spray of the shower head. Then he went to the mirror, and automatically pulled his razor out of the charge niche. Then he looked at himself in the mirror, and stopped.

Sleep had scoured his skin with emery paper, polished his fingers with diamond dust, abraded his scalp, sandblasted his eyes.

It was barely a colorful way of putting it. Almost literally, that was what had happened to him while he had slept.

He stared into the mirror, and recoiled from the sight. *If this is what sex with that damned Flinn does to a guy, then I'm going celibate.*

He was totally bald.

The wispy hair he recalled brushing out of his face during the previous on-shift was gone. His head was smooth and pale as a fortuneteller's crystal ball. He had no eyelashes. He had no eyebrows.

His chest was smooth as a woman's. His fingernails were almost translucent, as though the uppermost layers of dead horn had been removed.

He looked in the mirror again. He saw himself . . . more or less. Not very *much* less actually; no more than a pound of him was gone. But it was a noticeable pound.

His hair.

Assorted warts, moles, scar tissue, and callouses. The protective hairs in his nostrils. His kneecaps, elbows, and heels were scoured pink.

Joe Pareti found he was still holding the razor. He put it down. And stared at himself in horrified fascination for several timeless moments. He had a ghastly feeling that he knew what had happened to him. *I'm in deep trouble,* he thought.

He went looking for the Texas-Tower's doctor. He was not in the sick bay. He found him in the pharmacology lab. The doctor took one look and preceded him back to sick bay, where he confirmed Pareti's suspicions.

The doctor was a quiet, orderly man named Ball. Very tall, very thin, with an irreducible amount of

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professional ghoulishness. Normally he was inclined to gloom, but looking at the hairless Pareti he cheered perceptibly.

Pareti felt himself being dehumanized. He had followed Ball into the sick bay as a man; now he felt himself transformed into a specimen, a diseased culture to be peered at under a macroscope.

"Hah, yes," the doctor said. "Interesting. Would you turn your head, please? Good . . . good . . . fine, now blink."

Pareti did as he was told. Ball jotted down notes, turned on the recording cameras, and hummed to himself as he arranged a tray of shining instruments.

"You've caught it, of course," Ball said, almost as an afterthought.

"Caught what?" Pareti demanded, hoping he'd get some other answer.

"Ashton's disease. Goo infection, if you like, but we call it Ashton's, after the first case." Then he chuckled to himself: "I don't suppose you thought it was dermatitis?"

Pareti thought he heard eerie music, an organ, a harpsichord.

Ball went on. "Your case is atypical, just like all the others; so, really, that makes it typical. It has a rather ugly Latin name, as well; but Ashton's will do."

"Stuff all that," Pareti said angrily. "Are you absolutely sure?"

"Why do you think you get highhazard? Why do you think they keep me on board? I'm no G.P., I'm a specialist. Of course I'm absolutely sure. You're only the sixth recorded case. *Lancet* and the *AMA Journal* will be interested. In fact, with the proper presentation, *Scientific American* might care to publish an article."

"What can you do for me?" Pareti snapped.

"I can offer you a drink of excellent pre-war Bourbon," Dr. Ball said. "Not a specific for your ailment, but good for the whole man, so to speak."

"Stop screwing around with me. I don't think it's a ha-ha. Isn't there anything else? You're a specialist!"

Ball seemed to realize for the first time that his black humor was not being received with wild enthusiasm. "Mr. Pareti, medical science admits of no impossibility, not even the reversal of biological death. But that is a statement of theory. There are many things we could try. We could hospitalize you, stuff you with drugs, irradiate your skin, smear you with calamine lotion, even conduct experiments in homeopathy and acupuncture and moxibustion. But this would have no practical effect, except to make you very uncomfortable. In the present state of our knowledge, Ashton's is irreversible and, uh, terminal."

Pareti swallowed hard at the last word.

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Oddly, Ball smiled and added, "You might as well relax and enjoy it."

Pareti moved a step toward him, angrily. "You're a morbid son of a bitch!"

"Please excuse my levity," the doctor said quickly. "I know I have a dumb sense of humor. I don't rejoice in your fate . . . really, I don't . . . I'm bored on this desolate tower . . . I'm happy to have some real work. But I can see you don't know much about Ashton's . . . the disease may not be too difficult to live with."

"I thought you said it was terminal?"

"So I did. But then, *everything* is terminal, even health, even life itself. The question is how long, and in what manner."

Pareti slumped down into a Swedish-designed relaxer chair that converted—when the stirrups were elevated—into a dilation-and-curettage brace-framework for abortions. "I have a feeling you're going to lecture me," he said, with sudden exhaustion.

"Forgive me. It's so dull for me here."

"Go on, go on, for Christ's sake," Pareti wobbled his hand wearily.

"Well, the answer is ambiguous, but not unpromising," Ball said, settling with enthusiasm into his recitation. "I told you, I believe, that the most typical thing about the disease is its atypicality. Let us consider your illustrious predecessors.

"Case One died within a week of contracting the disease, apparently of a pneumonic complication . . ."

Pareti looked sick. "Swell," he said.

"Ah! But Case Two," Ball caroled, "Case Two was Ashton, after whom the disease was named. *He* became voluble, almost echolalic. One day, before a considerable crowd, he levitated to a height of eighteen feet. He hung there without visible support, haranguing the crowd in a hermetic language of his own devising. Then he vanished, into thin air (but not too thin for him) and he was never heard from again. Hence, Ashton's disease. Case Three . . ."

"What happened to Ashton?" Pareti asked, a vapor of hysteria in his voice.

Ball spread his hands, without an answer.

Pareti looked away.

"Case Three found that he could live underwater, though not in the air. He spent two happy years in the coral reefs off Marathon, Florida."

"What happened to *him?*" Pareti asked.

"A pack of dolphins did him in. It was the first recorded instance of a dolphin attacking a man. We have often wondered what he said to them."

"And the others?"

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"Case Four is currently living in the Ausable Chasm community. He operates a mushroom farm. He's become quite rich. We can't detect any effect of the disease beyond loss of hair and dead skin. In that way, your cases are similar, but it may just be coincidence. He has a unique way with mushrooms, of course.

"That sounds good," Pareti brightened.

"Perhaps. But Case Five is unfortunate. A really amazing degeneration of the organs, accompanied by a simultaneous external growth of same. This left him with a definitely surrealistic look: heart hanging below his left armpit, intestines wrapped around his waist, that sort of thing. Then he began to develop a chitinous exo-skeleton, antenna, scales, feathers—his body couldnt seem to decide what it was evolving into. It opted at last for earthwormdom—an anaerobic species, quite unusual. He was last seen burrowing into sandy loam near Point Judith. Sonar followed him for several months, all the way to central Pennsylvania."

Pareti shuddered. "Did he die then?"

Again, Ball spread his hands, no answer. "We don't know. He may be in a burrow, quiescent, parthenogenetic, hatching the eggs of an inconceivable new species. Or he may have evolved into the ultimate skeletal form . . . unliving, indestructible rock."

Pareti clasped his hairless hands, and shivered like a child. "Jesus," he murmured, "what a beautiful prospect. Something I can really look forward to."

"The form of your particular case *might* be pleasant," Ball ventured.

Pareti looked up at him with open malice. "Aren't you the smooth bastard, though! Sit out here in the water and laugh your ass off while the goo nibbles on some guy you never met before. What the hell do you do for amusement, roast cockroaches and listen to them scream?"

"Don't blame me, Mr. Pareti," the doctor said evenly. "*You* chose your line of work, not I. You were advised of the risks—"

"They said hardly anybody caught the goo disease; it was all in the small type on the contract," Pareti burst in.

"—but you *were* advised of the risks," Ball pressed on, "and you received hazard-bonus accordingly. You never complained during the three years that money was being poured into your account. You shouldn't bellyache now. It's rather unseemly. After all, you make approximately eight times my salary. That should buy you a lot of balm."

"Yeah, I made the bonuses," Pareti snarled, "and now I'm *really* earning it! The company—"

"The company," Ball said, with great care, "is absolutely free of re-

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sponsibility. You should indeed have read all that tiny type. But you're correct: you *are* earning the bonuses now. In effect you were paid to expose yourself to a rare disease. You were gambling with the company's money that you wouldn't contract Ashton's. You gambled, and unfortunately, seem to have lost."

"Not that I'm getting any," Pareti said archly, "but I'm not asking for your sympathy. I'm only asking for your professional advice, which you are paid—*overpaid,* in my estimation—to give. I want to know what I should do . . . and what I ought to expect."

Ball shrugged. "Expect the unexpected, of course. You're only the sixth, you know. There's been no clear-cut pattern established. The disease is as unstable as its progenitor . . . the goo. The only pattern—and I would hesitate even to suggest that it *was* a pattern—"

"Stop waltzing with me, damn it! Spit it out!"

Ball pursed his lips. He might have pressed Pareti as far as he cared to press him. "The pattern, then, would appear to be this: a radical change of relationship occurs between the victim and the external world. These can be *animate* transformations, like the growth of external organs and functional gills; or *inanimate* transformations, like the victim who levitated."

"What about the fourth case, the one who's still alive and normal?"

"He isn't exactly *normal,*" the doctor said, frowning. "His relationship with his mushrooms is a kind of perverted love; reciprocated, I might add. Some researchers suspect that he has himself become a kind of intelligent mushroom."

Pareti bit his thumbnail. There was a wildness in his eyes. "Isn't there any cure, *anything?*"

Ball seemed to be looking at Pareti with thinly veiled disgust. "Whimpering won't do you any good. Perhaps nothing will. I understand Case Five tried to hold off the effects as long as he could, with will power, or concentration . . . something ludicrous like that."

"Did it work?"

"For a while, perhaps. No one could be sure. In any case, it was strictly conjecture after a point; the disease finally took him over."

"But it's possible?"

Ball snorted. "Yes, Mr. Pareti, it's possible." He shook his head as if he could not believe the way Pareti was taking this. "Remember, none of the cases was like any other. I don't know what joys you can look forward to, but whatever they are, they're bound to be unusual."

Pareti stood up. *"I'll* fight it off. It isn't going to take me over like the others."

Ball's expression was of disgust. "I doubt it, Pareti. I never met any of the others, but from what I've read of them, they were far stronger men than you seem to be."

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"Why? Just because this has me shaken?"

"No, because you're a sniveler."

"You're the most compassionless mother I've ever met!"

"I cannot pretend grief that you've contracted Ashton's. You gambled, and you lost. Stop whimpering."

"You said that before, Dr. Ball."

"I say it again now!"

"Is that all from you?"

"That's all from me, to be sure," Dr. Ball said, snidely. "But it's not all for you, I'm equally sure."

"But you're sure that's all you have to tell me?"

Ball nodded, still wearing the insipid grin of the medical ghoul. He was wearing it as Pareti took two quick, short steps and jacked a fist into the doctor's stomach, just below the heart. Ball's eyes seemed to extrude almost as the goo extruded, and his face went three shades of gray toward matching his lab smock. Pareti held him up under the chin with his left hand and drove a short, straight right directly into the doctor's nose.

Ball flailed backward and hit the glass-fronted instrument case, breaking the glass with a crash. Ball settled to the floor, still conscious, but in awful pain. He stared up at Pareti as the harvester turned toward the door. Pareti turned back momentarily, smiling for the first time since he had entered sick bay.

"That's a helluva bedside manner you've got there, Doc."

Then he left.

He was forced to leave the TexasTower within the hour, as the law prescribed. He received a final statement of the back pay due him for the nine month shift he had been working. He also received a sizeable termination bonus. Though everyone knew Ashton's disease was not contagious, when he passed Peggy Flinn on his way to the exit lock, she looked at him sadly and said goodbye, but would not kiss him farewell. She looked sheepish. "Whore," Pareti murmured, but she heard him.

A company lift had been sent for him. A big fifteen-passenger job with two stewardesses, a lounge, movie theater and pocket billiard accommodations. Before he was put on board, the Project Superintendent, headman on the TexasTower, spoke to him at the lock.

"You aren't a Typhoid Mary; you can't give it to anyone. It's merely unlovely and unpredictable. That's what they tell me. Technically, there's no quarantine; you can go where you please. But realistically, you can appreciate that your presence in the surface cities wouldn't be welcome. Not that you'd be missing much . . . all the action is underground."

Pareti nodded silently. He was well over his earlier shaken reactions. He was now determined to fight the disease with the strength of his own will.

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"Is that it?" he asked the Project Super.

The man nodded, and extended his hand.

Pareti hesitated a moment, then shook it.

As Pareti was walking down the ramp to the lift, the Project Super called after him. "Hey, Pareti?"

Joe turned back.

"Thanks for belting that bastard Ball. I've been itching to do it for six years." He grinned.

It was an embarrassed, brave little smile that Joe Pareti returned, as he said goodbye to whom and what he was and boarded the lift for the real world.

He had free passage to the destination of his choice. He chose East Pyrites. If he were going to make a new life for himself with the money he had saved in three years working the goo fields, at least he was going to do it after one king-sized shore leave. It had been nine months since he had been anywhere near excitement—and you sure as hell couldn't call Peggy Flinn, with her flat chest, excitement—and there was time for fun before the time to settle down.

One of the stewardesses, wearing an off-the-bosom jumper with a "kicki" skirt, paused beside his seat and smiled down at him. "Care for a drink?"

Pareti's thoughts were hardly of liquor. She was a high-breasted, long-legged item with light turquoise hair. But he knew she had been apprised of his ailment, and her reaction would be the same as Peggy Flinn's.

He smiled up at her, thinking of what he would like to do with her if she were amenable. She took his hand and led him back to one of the washrooms. She led him inside, bolted the door, and dropped her clothes. Pareti was so astonished he had to let her undress him. It was cramped and close in the tiny bathroom, but the stewardess was marvelously inventive, not to mention limber.

When she was done with him, her face flushed, her neck spotted with little purple love-bites, her eyes almost feverish, she mumbled something about being unable to resist him, gathered up her clothes without even putting them on, and with acute embarrassment, floundered out of the bathroom, leaving him standing there with his pants down around his shoes.

Pareti looked at himself in the mirror. Again. He seemed to be doing nothing but staring into mirrors today. What stared out at him was himself, bald Pareti. He had the suddenly pleasurable feeling that whatever manner the goo infection in his body was taking to evolve itself, it would probably make him irresistible to women. All at once he could not find it in his heart to think too unkindly of the goo.

He had happy dreams of what

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joys and delights were in store for him if the goo, for instance, built him as big as a horse, or if it heightened this already obvious attraction women had for him, or if it—

He caught himself.

Uh-uh. No thank you. That was just what had happened to the other five. They had been taken over by the goo. It had done what it had wanted with them. Well, he was going to fight it, battle it from invading him from the top of his bald head to the soles of his uncalloused feet.

He got dressed.

No indeed not. He wasn't going to enjoy any more sex like he'd just had. And it became obvious to him that whatever the goo had done to the attraction-waves of his personality, it had also heightened his perceptions in that area. It had been the best he'd ever had.

He was going to grab a little fun in East Pyrites, and then buy himself a packet of land topside, find the right woman, settle down, and buy himself a good position with one of the companies.

He went back into the cabin of the lift. The other stewardess was on duty. She didn't say anything, but the one who had taken Pareti into the toilet did not show herself through the remainder of the flight, and her replacement kept staring at Joe as though she wanted to nibble him with tiny teeth.

East Pyrites, Nevada, was located eighty-seven miles south of the radioactive ghost town that had been called Las Vegas. It was also three miles below it. It was conservatively rated one of the marvels of the world. Its devotion to vice was obsessive, amounting to an almost puritanical drive to pleasure. In East Pyrites the phrase had been coined: PLEASURE IS A STERN DUTY IMPOSED ON US BY THE WORLD.

In East Pyrites, the fertility cults of antiquity had been revived in deadly seriousness. Pareti found this to be true as he stepped out of the dropshaft on the seventieth underlevel. A mass gangbang was in progress, in the middle of the intersection of Dude Avenue and Gold Dust Blvd., between fifty male members of the Ishtar Boppers and ten lovely girls who had signed in blood their membership to the Swingers of Cybele.

He carefully avoided the imbroglio. It looked like fun, but he wasn't going to aid and abet the goo in taking him over.

He hailed a taxi and stared at the scenery. The Temple of Strangers was served by the virgin daughters of the town's leading citizens; executions for impiety were held publicly in the Court of the Sun; Christianity was in disrepute. It wasn't any fun.

The old Nevadan custom of gambling was still observed, but had been elaborated, ramified, and extended. In East Pyrites, the say-

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ing, "You bet your life," had real and sinister meanings.

Many of the practices in East Pyrites were un-Constitutional; others were implausible; and some were downright inconceivable.

Pareti loved it at once.

He selected the Round-The-World Combination Hotel, close to the Hall of Perversions, just across the street from the verdant expanse of Torture Garden. In his room, he showered, changed, and tried to decide what to do first. Dinner in the Slaughterhouse, of course. Then perhaps a little mild exercise in the cool darkness of the Mudbath Club. After that—

He suddenly became aware that he was not alone. Someone or something was in the room with him.

He looked around. There was apparently nothing wrong, except that he could have sworn that he had put his jacket on a chair. Now it was on the bed, near him.

After a moment's hesitation he reached for the jacket. The garment slid away from him. "Try to catch me!" it said, in a coy, insipid voice. Pareti grabbed for it, but the jacket danced away from him.

Pareti stared at it. Wires? Magnets? A joke of the management of the hotel? He knew instinctively that he would find no rational way in which the coat had moved and talked. He gritted his teeth and stalked it.

The jacket moved away, laughing, dipping like a bat. Pareti cornered it behind the room's massage unit, and managed to grab a sleeve. *I've got to have this goddamn thing sent out to be cleaned and burned,* he thought insanely.

It lay limp for a moment. Then it curled around and tickled the palm of his hand.

Pareti giggled involuntarily, then flung the garment away from him and hurried out of the room.

Descending by dropshaft to the street, he knew that had been the *true* onset of the disease. It had altered the relationship between him and an article of clothing. An inanimate object. The goo was getting bolder.

What would it do next?

He was in a soft place called The Soft Place. It was a gambling hall whose innovation was an elaborate game called StickIt. The game was played by seating oneself before a long counter with a round polyethylene-lined hole in the facing panel, and inserting a certain portion of the anatomy therein. It was strictly a man's game, of course.

One placed one's bets on the flickering light-panels that covered the counter-top. These lights were changed in a random pattern by a computer programmer, and through the intricacies of the betting and odds, various things happened behind the facing panels, to whomever happened to be inserted

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in the playing-hole. Some of the things were very nice indeed. Some were not.

Ten seats down to his right, Pareti heard a man scream, high and shrill, like a woman. An attendant in white came with a sheet and a pneumatic-stretcher, and took the bettor away. The man to Pareti's left was sitting forward, up tight against the panel, moaning with pleasure. His WINNER light was flashing.

A tall, elegant woman with inky hair came up beside Pareti's chair. "Honey, you shouldn't be wasting anything as nice as you here. Why don't we go downshaft to my brig and squam a little . . ."

Pareti panicked. He knew the goo was at work again. He withdrew from the panel just as the flickering lights went up LOSER in front of him, and the distinct sound of whirring razor blades came out of the playing-hole. He saw his bets sucked into the board, and he turned without looking at the woman, knowing she would be the most gorgeous creature he had ever seen. And he didn't need *that* aggravation on top of everything else.

He ran out of The Soft Place. The goo, and Ashton's disease, were ruining his good time of hell-for-leather. But he was not, repeat *not*, going to let it get the better of him. Behind him, the woman was crying.

He was hurrying, but he didn't know where he was going. Fear encased him like a second self. The thing he ran from was within him, pulsing and growing within him, running with him, perhaps moving out ahead of him. But the empty ritual of flight calmed him, left him better able to think.

He sat down on a park bench beneath an obscenely shaped purple lamp post. The neon designs were gagging and suggestive. It was quiet here—except for the Muzak—he was in the world famous Hangover Square. He could hear nothing—except the Muzak—and the stifled moans of a tourist expiring in the bushes.

What could he do? He could resist, he could close out the effects of Ashton's disease by concentration . . .

A newspaper fluttered across the street and plastered itself around his foot. Pareti tried to kick it away. It clung to his foot, and he heard it whisper, "Please, oh please do not spurn me."

"Get away from me!" Pareti screamed. He was suddenly terrified; he could see the newspaper crinkle as it tried to unsnap his shoe buttons.

"I want to kiss your feet," the newspaper pleaded. "Is that so terrible? Is it wrong? Am I so ugly?"

"Let go!" Pareti shouted, tugging at the paper, which had formed into a pair of giant white lips.

A man walked past him,

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stopped, stared, and said, "Jim, that's the damndest bit I ever saw. You do that as a lounge act or just for kicks?"

"Voyeur!" the newspaper hissed, and fluttered away down the street.

"How do you control it?" the man asked. "Special controls in your pocket or something?"

Pareti shook his head numbly. He was so tired suddenly. He said, "You actually saw it kiss my foot?"

"I mean to tell you I saw it," the man said.

"I hoped that maybe I was only hallucinating," Pareti said. He got up from the bench and walked unsteadily away. He didn't hurry.

He was in no rush to meet the next manifestation of Ashton's disease.

In a dim bar he drank six souses and had to be carried to the public Dry-Out on the corner. He cursed the attendants for reviving him. At least when he was bagged, he didn't have to compete with the world around him for possession of his sanity.

In the Taj Mahal he played girls, purposely aiming badly when he threw the dirks and the kris at the rapidly spinning bawds on the giant wheel. He clipped the ear off a blonde, planted one ineffectually between the legs of a brunette, and missed entirely with his other shots. It cost him seven hundred dollars. He yelled cheat and was bounced.

A head-changer approached him on Leopold Way, and offered the unspeakable delights of an illegal head-changing operation by a doctor who was "clean and very decent." He yelled for a cop, and the little ratfink scuttled away in the crowd.

A taxi driver suggested the Vale of Tears, and though it sounded lousy, he gave the guy the go-ahead. When he entered the place —which was on the eighty-first level, a slum section of foul odors and wan street lights—he recognized it at once for what it was. A necro-joint. The smell of freshly-stacked corpses rose up to gag him.

He only stayed an hour.

There were nautch joints, and blind pigs, and hallucinogen bars, and a great many hands touching him, touching him.

Finally, after a long time, he found himself back in the park, where the newspaper had come after him. He didn't know how he'd gotten there, but he had a tattoo of a naked seventy-year old female dwarf on his chest.

He walked through the park, but found that he had picked an unpromising route. Dogwood barked at him and caressed his shoulders; Spanish Moss sang a fandango; an infatuated willow drenched him in tears. He broke into a run, trying to get away from the importunities of cherry trees, the artless Western prattle of sagebrush, the languors

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of poplar. Through him, his disease was acting on the environment. He was infecting the world he passed through; no, he wasn't contagious to humans; hell no, it was worse than that: he was a Typhoid Mary for the *inanimate world!* And the altered world loved him, tried to win him. Godlike, an Unmoved Mover, unable to deal with his involuntary creations, he fought down panic and tried to escape from the passions of a suddenly writhing world.

He passed a roving gang of juvies, who offered to beat the crap out of him for a price, but he turned them down and stumbled on.

He came out onto Sade Boulevard, but even here there was no relief. He could hear the little paving stones whispering about him:

"Say, he's *cute!*"

"Forget it, he'd never look at you."

"You vicious bitch!"

"I tell you he'll never look at you."

"Sure he will. Hey, Joe—"

"What did I tell you? He didn't even look at you!"

"But he's got to! Joe, Joe, it's me, over here—"

Pareti whirled and yelled, "As far as I'm concerned, one paving stone looks exactly like another paving stone. If you've seen one, you've seen 'em all."

That shut them up, by God! But what was this?

High overhead, the neon sign above cut-rate Sex City was beginning to flash furiously. The letters twisted and formed a new message: I AM A NEON SIGN AND I ADORE JOE PARETI!

A crowd had gathered to observe the phenomenon. "What the hell is a Joe Pareti?" one woman asked.

"A casualty of love," Pareti told her. "Speak the name softly, the next corpse you see may be your own."

"You're a twisto," the woman said.

"I fear not," Pareti said politely, a little madly. "Madness is my ambition, true. But I dare not hope to achieve it."

She stared at him as he opened the door and went into Sex City. But she didn't believe her eyes when the doorknob gave him a playful little pat on the ass.

"The way it works is this," the salesman said. "Fulfillment is no problem; the tough thing is desire, don't you dig? Desires *die* of fulfillment and gotta be replaced by new, *dif*-ferent desires. A lotta people desire to have weirdo desires, but they can't make it onaccounta having lived a lifetime on the straights. But us here at the Impulse Implantation Center can condition you to like anything you'd like to like."

He had hold of Pareti's sleeve with a tourisnag, a rubber-lined clamp on the end of a telescoping

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rod; it was used to snag tourists passing through the Odd Services Arcade, to drag them closer to specific facilities.

"Thanks, I'll think it over," Pareti said, trying without much success to get the tourisnag off his sleeve.

"Wait, hey, Jim, dig! We got a special bargain rate, a real cheapo. It's only on for the next hour! Suppose we fix you up with pedophilia, a really high-class desire which has not as yet been over-exploited? Or take bestiality . . . or take *both* for the special giveaway price—"

Pareti managed to pull the snag from his sleeve, and hurried on down the Arcade without looking back. He knew that one should never get Impulse Implantation from boiler-shop operators. A friend of his had made that mistake while on leave from a Texas-Tower, had been stuck with a passion for gravel, and had died after three admittedly enjoyable hours.

The arcade was teeming, the screams and laughter of weekend freakoffs and smutters rising up toward the central dome of ever changing light patterns, crapout kliegs, and grass-jets emitting their pleasant, ceaseless streams of thin blue marijuana smoke. He needed quiet; he needed aloneness.

He slid into a Spook Booth. Intercourse with ghosts was outlawed in some states, but most doctors agreed that it was not harmful if one made certain to wash off the ectoplasmic residue afterward with a thirty per cent alcohol solution. Of course, it was more risky for women (he saw a Douche & Bidet Rest Stop just across the arcade concourse, and marveled momentarily at the thoroughness of the East Pyrites Better Business Bureau; they took care of every exigency).

He leaned back in the darkness, heard the beginning of a thin, eerie wail . . .

Then the Booth door was opened. A uniformed attendant asked, "Mr. Joseph Pareti?"

Pareti nodded. "What is it?"

"Sorry to disturb you, sir. A call for you." She handed him a telephone, caressed his thigh, and left, closing the door. Pareti held the phone and it buzzed. He put it to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hi there."

"Who is this?"

"This is your telephone, stupid. Who did you think it was?"

"I can't take all this! Stop talking!"

"It's not talking that's difficult," the telephone said. "The tough thing is finding something to say."

"Well, what do you want to say?"

"Nothing much. I just wanted you to know that somewhere, somehow, Bird lives."

"Bird? Bird who? What in hell are you talking about?"

There was no answer. The telephone had hung up.

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He put the telephone down on the comfort ledge, and sank back, hoping to God he could make it in peace and quiet. The phone rang again, almost immediately. He did not pick it up, and it went from ring to buzz. He put it to his ear again.

"Hello?"

"Hi there," a silky voice said.

"Who is *this?*"

"This is your telephone, Joe baby. I called before. I thought you might like this voice better."

"Why don't you leave me alone?" Joe almost sobbed.

"How can I, Joe?" the telephone asked. "I love you! Oh Joe, Joe, I've tried so hard to please you. But you're so moody, baby, I just don't understand. I was a really *pretty* Dogwood, and you barely glanced at me! I became a newspaper, and you didn't even read what I *wrote* about you, you ungrateful thing!"

"You're my disease," Pareti said unsteadily. "Leave me alone!"

"Me? A *disease?*" the telephone asked, a hurt note in the silken voice. "Oh, Joe, darling, how can you call me that? How can you pretend indifference after all we've been to each other?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Pareti said.

"You do *too* know! You came to me every day, Joe, out on the warm sea. I was sort of young and silly then; I didn't understand; I tried to hide from you. But you lifted me up out of the water; you brought me close to you; you were patient and kind, and little by little I grew up. Sometimes I'd even try to wriggle up the pole handle to kiss your fingers . . ."

"Stop it!" Pareti felt his senses reeling, this was insanity, everything was becoming something else, the world and the booth were whirling around. "You've got it all wrong—"

"I have not!" the telephone said indignantly. "You called me pet names, I was your screwin' goo! I'll admit, I had tried other men before you, Joe. But then, *you'd* been with women before we met, so we mustn't throw the past up to one another. But even with the other five I tried, I was never able to become what I wanted to be. Can you understand how frustrating that was for me, Joe? Can you? I had my whole life before me and I didn't know what to do with it. One's shape is one's career, you know, and I was confused, until I met you . . . excuse me if I babble, darling, but this is the first chance we've had for a real talk."

Through the gibbering madness of it all, Pareti saw it now, and understood it. They had underestimated the goo. It had been a young organism, mute but not unintelligent, shaped by the powerful desires it possessed like every other living creature. To have *form*. It was evolving—Into what?

"Joe, what do you think? What would you like me to become?"

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"Could you turn into a girl?" Pareti asked, timorously.

"I'm afraid not," the telephone said. "I tried that a few times, and I tried being a nice collie, too, and a horse. But I guess I did a pretty sloppy job, and anyhow, it felt all wrong. I mean, it's just not *me.* But name anything else!"

"No!" Pareti bellowed. For a moment, he had been going along with it. The lunacy was catching.

"I could become a rug under your feet, or if you wouldn't think it was too daring, I could become your underwear—"

"Goddamn it, I don't love you!" Pareti shrieked. "You're nothing but gray ugly goo! I hate your guts! You're a disease . . . why don't you go love something like yourself?"

"There's nothing like me except *me,"* the telephone sobbed. "And besides, it's *you* I love."

"Well, I don't give a damn for you!"

"You're cruel!"

"You stink, you're ugly, I don't love you, I've *never* loved you!"

"Don't say that, Joe," the telephone warned.

"I'm saying it! I never loved you, *I only used you!* I don't want your love, your love nauseates me, do you understand?"

He waited for an answer, but there was suddenly only an ominous, surly silence on the telephone. Then he heard the dial tone. The telephone had hung up.

Now. Pareti has returned to his hotel. He sits in his embroidered room, which has been cunningly constructed for the mechanical equivalents of love. Doubtless he is lovable, but he feels no love. That is obvious to the chair, to the bed, and to the flighty overhead lamp. Even the bureau, not normally observant, realizes that Pareti is loveless.

It is more than sad; it is annoying. It goes beyond mere annoyance; it is maddening. To love is a mandate, to be unloved is insupportable. Can it be true? Yes, it can; Joe Pareti does not love his loveless lover.

Joe Pareti is a man. He is the sixth man to spurn the loving lover's lovely love. Man does not love: can one argue the syllogism? Can frustrated passion be expected to defer judgment any longer?

Pareti looks up and sees the gilded mirror on the facing wall. He remembers that a mirror led Alice to Looking-Glass Land, and Orpheus to hell; that Cocteau called mirrors the gateways to hell.

He asks himself what a mirror is. He answers himself that a mirror is an eye waiting to be looked through.

He looks into the mirror and finds himself looking *out* of the mirror.

Joe Pareti has five new eyes. Two on the bedroom walls, one on the bedroom ceiling, one in the bathroom, one in the hall. He looks

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through his new eyes and sees new things. There is the couch, sad lovelorn creature. Half visible is the standing lamp, its curved neck denoting fury. Over here is the closet door, stiff-backed, mute with rage.

Love is always a risk; but hate is a deadly peril.

Joe Pareti looks out through the mirrors, and he says to himself, I see a man sitting on a chair, and the chair is biting his leg.

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Cader Idris is a high ridge in the Cambrian mountains, which cover most of Wales. It is there that the undertaker-protagonist of this perfectly composed story goes to fulfill the strange last wish of his strange mother, a woman with vision—and visions.

LIGHT ON CADER

by Josephine Saxton

UNUSED TO WALKING, HE NOW strode slowly uphill, after the first eager hundred yards in which he had lost his breath, but not the will to climb. At forty-one, he reflected, one should be much fitter than this; one had been in excellent health years ago, but not into the past had he come, no nostalgia, not today. Something like nostalgia, perhaps.

Cader Idris was as his mother had described it—in the twenty-one years since her death it had not changed. Mountains do not change so quickly, and its rough slopes and creeping mists seemed familiar to him, although this was his first visit, not only to Cader, but to Wales.

She had wanted to die in Wales, her birthplace, but she had been too ill to be moved. She had pledged him a few days before she died to go to Wales and walk up Cader for her, to see for her the view, to say goodbye to it all in her stead. At the time he had been unmoved by her urgent request, but, being kind and acquiescing naturally to the requests of the dying, he had promised to respect her wishes. And then forgotten all about it—until the previous week.

Both he and his wife had decided that he needed a vacation, not a long one, just a change for a few days, and a rest. He was overtired, very irritable, full of sinus trouble. Sitting and thinking where to take himself for a lone trip, it had suddenly come to him that he could go to Wales. He remembered his mother; he remembered Cader Idris; he knew then where he had to go, and here he

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was. It was a grey wet day, and cold. When he got to the top, almost three thousand feet, a good climb for him, he knew that he would be able to see nothing. Still, with any luck a wind might spring up, and in half an hour it would all clear away.

Still striding slowly up, it occurred to him that even if his mother had been able to come to Wales, she would have been hard put to it to climb up here with her bad heart and her rheumatism and her nerves. Her nerves! That had been the family's way of being polite about her ill temper, her resentment at having given birth to them (five girls and three boys), and her bitterness at never having found "her own true way." He knew that as the youngest child, he must have been the last straw and the hardest to bear to a woman who already had seven children. But still, she had loved him the most; he had always felt that.

She had been a strange one, with no close friends either in or out of the family, given at times to mysterious and apparently senseless utterances concerning only herself and her own inner vision. And the singing. He remembered the singing, both in Welsh and English, some of the traditional songs and some of her own making, full of her own dreams. Oak trees, ash trees, fireships, mountains. When she was really angry, she would scream at them that she was just an old washerwoman with the soul of a bard. They would all laugh when she said this; she was never a washerwoman, they had had sufficient money to live in reasonable comfort, and as for Mam being a bard . . . Dad had once caused them all to laugh by saying:

"They 'ave *wimmin* bards then, eh girl?"

Mam had gone white and just stood there and screamed and screamed. She had yelled at Dad that a bard was a person with vision, not a man or a woman, but a soul with inspiration, vision. She had vision, she had screamed. Visions such as she had never told, she said, things nobody knew of, because they were not among the blessed, like she was. Dad had got really mad, then. He could never tolerate her hysterical outbursts, and this time he not only got angry, he taunted her.

"Tell us then, about your visions, girl. Tell us about them. If you' goin' to be a prophet, no point in not tellin' the people now, is there?"

Mam had wept and said that she must not tell what she had seen, on pain of a sacrifice of a life. She had promised not ever to speak of it, when she was twelve years old. Dad had somehow changed, possibly with the fear that his wife was insane, and he had become nasty. He went over and got her by the shoulders and stared at her.

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"You'll tell me what you saw girl, or I'll lay my hand to you, I say. My wife will tell me her secrets, and then we'll have the last of this bard and vision nonsense for all. I've 'eard enough of it. You're a woman and my wife and a mother and no more, do you 'ear?"

"I can't tell you in front of the children. I'll tell you tonight, Dad," she had answered him, in a voice as calm as treacle. But her face. It had been full of hatred and revenge, as if by letting him have his way, she would punish him, dreadfully. Soon after that she had gone away to the hospital for three weeks for E.C.T., and that, plus the scene with Dad, seemed to have calmed down the worst of her tantrums and moods. Not until she was ill and dying did she show any great disturbance, and by then nobody took much notice of her, or what she said. But when he had been little, and Mam had been well in between periods of discontent, she had told them stories and had been really kind to them. She had made Welsh cake, a kind of flat currant scone made with curds and sugar, and she had told them of the giants, the old ones, the fire-ship of the chosen, fairies, Owen Glendower. That was going back a bit, when he had been very little, the youngest, and her favourite.

Suddenly heavy with sadness, he stopped a moment, sensing that he must be getting near to the top of this walk. He enjoyed however, the sensation of his own heavy breathing, and the heat he had created in himself with the exertion. He thought that perhaps he ought to do something like this more often; it would be of benefit.

He was an almost nondescript man, dull looking, dressed in grey flannels and ordinary black shoes; not suitable clothes for mountain climbing, especially in this heavy wet mist that covered him in round droplets, slowly soaking into the gabardine which had been dry-cleaned and was no longer waterproof; but part of his ordinariness had been cultivated over the years. His profession required of him that he should be unobtrusive, plain, nondescript. He had longed to grow a small neat beard, but he knew that it would be unsuitable to a degree, as would have been the yellow sports car that he could have bought from his brother, were it not for the fact that he could hardly drive up to a client's house in such a flashy vehicle even in these times. An undertaker must have about him at all times an air of old-fashioned decorum. After all, there was nothing modern about death.

So, with his short-cut and well-creamed hair, his shaven face, his very ordinary clothes, he climbed still further up Cader Idris, regretting much the heavy mist that obscured his view. He began to

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think about his wife, at home: she would still be in the kitchen in her blue quilted housecoat, raking out the stove, a job she loathed and which he almost always did for her; the children would be on their way to school; the transistor would be playing a constant stream of music, and possibly a new tea service was standing on the kitchen table, the reward for a patient saving of cigarette coupons. Every morning for a week she had gone to meet the mailman, hoping that it had arrived. It would console her for his absence. She was easily consoled; she never seemed to be deeply troubled by anything. Well, that was all right, wasn't it? That was right in a woman, peace and quiet, content.

Then why was he so glad to get away?

His foot caught in something soft. A dead sea gull lying on the gravelly soil, its eyes so *extremely* closed. Death had, of course, long since ceased to fascinate him, but he could recall the time when he had been fascinated by dead things.

As a boy he had found a dead sea gull on the moor up in the Pennines where they lived, farther from the sea even than Idris. He had taken it home, dragging it by a wing, all those years ago, and buried it at the bottom of the garden, and he remembered how badly he had done the job, the clay soil being heavy; how his mother had discovered it and got into a rage, washing all his clothes, scrubbing him, yelling about the horror of dead things; that he was never to touch anything dead, let alone bring it home.

He touched the dead sea gull with his plain black shoe that squeaked with wetness, smiling at his memory. Never touch anything dead. And he had become an undertaker. Daily he prepared corpses for their more or less elaborate silk beds, padding out the sinking eyelids and cheeks with cotton wool, paring finger nails, cleaning all the folds of skin, sometimes shampooing the hair of old women, brushing and curling and pinning it into its last glamour, as it had not looked in life, painting the faces skillfully, making them presentable for "the last look" of more or less mourning relatives and friends, bringing a healthy blush to a cold white cheek, and tying white ribbons in elegant decoration for the act of being dead.

As long as people died, he would never lack for food and shelter; from even the least assuming dead, those in the plainest of boxes, he got a fee of some kind. Smiling with only his lips, his teeth held together, he muttered, glancing back at the sea gull:

"Long live death," but he did not feel any great cynicism. For another hundred or more feet he blundered further up the wet

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shale, half seeing a twisted but determined rowan clinging to the rock, alone and alive, shivering but splendid with the last of its red berries held out for the birds. Over the other side of this mountain there would be a small farmhouse where his mother had been born. Perhaps, if there was time, he would have a walk down and look.

Something occurred which for a brief moment seemed to stop his heart. Above him on the slope floated a row of seven orange lights, about two feet above the ground. All the stories of his mother's began to riot in his mind illogically; will-o-wisps, old ones, cave spirits, luring lone travelers into the depths of the mountain—he saw many of his mental images of her words in the few seconds that it took him to realise that the seven orange lights were the fluorescent anoraks of six schoolgirls and one woman, picking their maidenly way, safely and correctly clad for mountain mist. The woman stared at his clothes as she passed him, not speaking, but making sure that he felt her disapproval of him standing there wet through; and the last girl in the row also turned to look at him, not glaring, but smiling covertly, raising her eyebrows at the woman's back; an attempt to involve him briefly in a moment of complicity. He felt a stab of anger at the girl for no reason he could think of. He imagined her lying in his mortuary with a little satisfaction, and broke her gaze, and began to walk up the slope again, a very normal and self-righteous expression holding down his mouth.

Probably, he thought, apart from the orange-clad map-reading expedition, he was the only person on the mountain that day. If he twisted an ankle or broke a leg, he would be beyond reach of help.

This thought did not scare him at all: he had no fear of accident.

He had never had one that he could remember. Not even a minor car crash had starred his uneventful existence with its near-horror; for his friends he had never had a dreadful tale with which to amuse. Nor did he care about this lack of excitement. Not having tragedy, like his friend who had crashed his car and killed his wife and child, had its compensations. Today he was certainly not going to have any mishap. It would be too uncharacteristic.

The rocks were becoming bigger and closer together; less and less wiry grass grew between the shaly scales of the skin of the earth, and now no trees were within his limited view. There was quite a breeze, but it did nothing to clear the mist. He wished that the sun would burn through the obscuring cloud and show him the land spread out below. Still walking, he caught himself muttering

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out loud. He had been grumbling. Sometimes he had a grumble out loud when he was alone. Usually about nothing in particular, just the boredom, the hard work, the weather, his sinuses, mild indigestion. This was his only outlet for frustration. He knew no other way of doing it and despised himself even for this weakness. As he heard himself muttering:

"Damn shoes need soling, bloody bore, fed up, fed up, damn fed up, up . . ." he shut his mouth tight. Silly fool.

The top of the mountain, right near the edge of a sheer cliff. This was where she used to sit on clear days, with her feet dangling over the edge. This is what she wanted him to do: come and sit here and look at the view for her. It had seemed very urgent to her, that he come rather than any of the others.

"It has to be you goes to Cader, because you married that girl, see." He had not known what connection his wife had; he had thought his mother was lost in the cloudy places of her old mind, for she had always hated his wife, fought him about his marriage, had been, in fact, a dreadful mother-in-law. Sitting on the shale, he now felt a fool, having come at the request of someone dead and gone. He could have gone to the coast, got some sun. Possibly she had felt some remorse for her treatment of her daughter-in-law and gave him the task of coming to Cader to make it up with him. She would consider it a privilege, coming here on her behalf. He forgot his mother and took delight in settling himself down, suddenly aware that he was experiencing "free time", and that he would not have anything demanded of him for at least three days. He slowly eased himself into a sitting position and picked the little bits of damp shale off the palm of his hand. He began to search his pockets for pipe and matches and tobacco, shredded up some of the molasses-smelling strands, and packed some carefully into his metal-stemmed pipe, lighting it with several matches, apparently not annoyed that so many of them went out in the moist wind. "Must get a gas pipe-lighter with a storm shield."

With a sweet, smooth smoke passing through him, he gazed out onto the mist, imagining what the landscape might be like beneath; if things would be much changed since the days when his mother had come to stare, doubtless in need, as he was, of peace and quiet. Very quietly and fervently, sitting there, occasionally re-lighting the pipe, he wished that the sun would appear.

After a while, to his wonder, it did so, beginning with a faint pale glow high above him. Moved emotionally by this obliging act of nature, he stared at the patch of spreading light, and felt his spirits

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begin to soar. Things were going his way after all. Today would be one of those marvellous days when instead of things working against him—things like the weather, the ignition of his car, his pipe, finding his way in strange places—today would go like smooth running water; all would be for his pleasure. Very rarely was it that he had this sort of feeling, and the kind of day he now looked forward to. Breathing with satisfaction, he sat and waited for the sun to become stronger, and for all the mist to clear, anticipating his senses feeding on the magnificent panorama that he knew must be waiting. His anticipation did not match his experience however; he had expected to have to wait at least half an hour before he saw anything.

Within a minute everything had changed for him. He saw and heard things that were such a shock to his senses that he could barely believe in what happened, but he had to: it was so plain, self-evident, and real.

All the air around him began, faintly, to vibrate with a high-pitched but musical hum, not irritating, but exciting. It recalled wind in telegraph wires that as a boy he had thought to be the music of the spheres, but up on Cader top there were no telegraph wires. What he heard expanded to fill all his hearing, and then he saw, lighting up all the mist with a golden glow, a circular ship sail towards him; its substance concocted out of nothing in his experience, the sight of it filling him with great happiness. The ship was perhaps thirty feet across and ten deep and appeared to be hovering but spinning rapidly. He did not move; he was held quite immobile by shock. A circular spot appeared in the side of this fiery ship and widened slowly like organic material, some growing birth channel out of which something new and beautiful, he felt sure, would certainly appear. When the door had grown into a darkly coloured space about five feet high and two feet wide, a figure appeared standing there on the sill, holding out a slim pale hand. The figure was dressed in a plain garment of shining white material, and its hair fell to its shoulders in a pale straight style, and he could not be sure which sex this person was. This in no way disturbed him, he who thought people of dubious sex preposterous and obscene, for this person emanated such a friendly atmosphere, just standing there, that to be in its presence gave him a sense of peace. His fear and shock left him entirely. Then it spoke, with a lovely quiet voice.

"Come on, have no fear. You may if you wish ride with us today. From our ship you will be able to see wonderful things."

He could not answer. He was filled with something that pre-

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vented him from opening his mouth, made him tremble and sweat, but it was not fear. He wanted to go in the strange ship with his new friend; he knew that all his life he had waited for just this, something greatly extraordinary, something wonderful. For a moment he remembered his mother's insistence that it should be he who came here for her, and it suddenly became clear that this was his mother's vision; she had wanted him to see too, her favourite son. She had known it would come for him. It did not occur to him to question how the ship-being had known who he was, or when he would be here on the mountain, after an interval of twenty-one years since her death. He questioned nothing, but knew that everything today was right, this was for him . . .

With difficulty he struggled to his feet, feeling weak with excitement, not noticing his stiffness from the wet and the cold, not getting the sharp pain in his cheek-bones that he always got standing up, from the blocked sinuses. Still not speaking, he held out his hand to the person on the hovering ship. He wanted to say all sorts of things. His new friend smiled with understanding, and he knew that he had been understood without speaking. He held the still extended hand and felt life and warmth vibrating up through his arm from its strong warm grip. He stepped out onto the fire-ship, full of happiness and wonder, tears in his eyes, a phenonemon he had not experienced since his early childhood.

At dusk that day, a party of schoolgirls, hysterical and tear stained, barely controlled by a white-faced woman, approached a house in Llyn Gwernan, a village at the foot of Cader Idris. They had found the broken body of a man at the foot of the western cliff that afternoon, a man they had seen earlier walking up the mountain in a raincoat and ordinary shoes. The foolish man must have slipped and fallen off the cliff edge. It was all too easy to do without proper mountain shoes.

Police later found a pipe of half-smoked tobacco and several used matches at the top of the cliff. Foul play was ruled out, but not the possibility of suicide. One policeman held the opinion that if the man had slipped, the shale would be much more disturbed than it was. It appeared that he had simply stepped off the edge.

When they told his wife, she showed no surprise but a great deal of quiet grief. She made them some tea and served it in a new tea service, trembling over the delicate china. When they asked her if she thought it likely that he had taken his own life, she said she did not know: with a man like her husband it was impossible to

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tell what was going on in his mind; he never confided in her or in anyone; he was a silent man, self-controlled, took everything in his stride. No, they never had financial worry. Yes, a good marriage, a good husband. No family quarrels since his mother died; she had not been liked by his mother, but all that was past, long past. She herself had given him no cause for upset, had been faithful. He had gone for a short rest; he had been overtired, yes, very irritable. No, she did not think he had taken his own life. She felt sure of it. Just tired, nothing more. Her husband, he must have somehow slipped, and fallen all the way down, to his death.

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There has never been any serious shortage of violent news in the daily press, but the last few years have been enough to unbalance even the great gray perspective of the N. Y. Times. *The multiple murder (Chicago's nurse slayer, Austin's mad sniper) had stage center in 1966, the riot in 1967; and the journalistic intermissions are filled by the contributions of the lively and literary arts, which are now "telling it like it is." This is a story about a society and an age—it is set in the 22nd century, but it might have been earlier—that has reacted against violence to the extent that it has been totally suppressed—almost.*

CRACK IN THE SHIELD

by Arthur Sellings

THE DAY—THE CLIMACTIC DAY in the life of Philip Tawn—began with deceptive normality. There was no cloud on the horizon, either in the far-off sky—he always switched his viewer on first thing in the morning—or in his own soul. *That* was eased into wakefulness by the scent of the day from the air conditioner, the tang of depilatory on his cheeks. More aggressively, the vapor jets of his shower completed the job.

Breakfast arrived smoothly from the dispenser. Over it he pondered the work of the day ahead, but only in the untroubled manner befitting a ranking clan member. The outline scheme for the Elephants was one small worry—he hadn't worked on a computer account before—but he was confident of his ideas on the matter.

He took a scooter from a niche outside his apartment and wheeled away down the half-mile long corridor to the elevator block. There, amid formal greetings of "A day of pride to the Peacocks," and more casual ones to people he knew, he descended to the car hangar.

He slid into his '51 Cheetah sports car—next year, when he married, he would trade it in for a more sedate model—turned the shield lever and rolled to the exit port. He lit a denicotinized cigarette while he waited his turn.

When the green light flashed

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for him, he jabbed the synchro-button. His own shield and the vaster shield of the clan house synchronized at that point to a frequency pattern that was virtually impossible to duplicate, meshing and allowing him to pass through. It closed behind him like a sphincter, not for a second having presented to the world outside a chink in the armor, either in the house shield or his own.

As he rolled along Peacock Boulevard he passed the service port. Trucks from other clans—service clans like Bees, with food; Beavers with maintenance squads—were lined up for entry. Traffic handling here was more complicated than at the clan ports. Here vehicles were admitted, one at a time, into an armored chamber outside the limits of the house shield. The shield, though, stretched impregnably across the far end.

In the chamber, the crew was scanned minutely by closed-circuit TV. The truck shield had to be turned off—electronic devices checked that it was—the lever detached and placed in a slot which retracted to file it against departure. The crew had to show their identity plastics. Scanners checked the electronically printed details, while the same devices that had checked the truck shield probed into every recess, assuring themselves that no mechanism existed which could possibly reactivate it.

Only then was the house shield neutralized at that point to allow the truck through to the unloading bays.

It was a complex, time-consuming procedure, but only by such devices was the security of Philip Tawn's world preserved. Barely two years before—not, thankfully, at a Peacock Clan house—the procedures had been lax, and a hoodlum truck, with cleverly forged identification and a concealed reactor, had got in. The hoods had ransacked the place, holding up anyone in sight. People didn't wear their personal shields inside the security of their own house—that was the whole idea of clans—and these had been totally unprepared. The gang had even attempted to seize the shield control center itself. Only a frantic marshaling of emergency screens had averted that, or the consequences would have been such as to shudder at. As it was, the truck got away—the directors of that ill-fated house had been only too relieved to let it out—with a fortune in loot. The Ant channels had buzzed with the incident for weeks afterward.

It was difficult to imagine anything like that happening at a Peacock house. The Peacocks were hardly technological masterminds; they were in publicity. But, because of that, they had more channels than any other clan—with the possible exception of the

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Ants—to latest developments. But the incident had reinforced the need for constant vigilance. Every clan had upped its research budget stiffly, following it.

Philip hit the main highway into the city. Before the traffic thickened up too much, he selected his target for the usual a.m. proofing, a bald-headed man in a '48 Whippet. The man himself was a Bee; no Whippet would have been seen dead in such an antiquated product of his own clan.

Philip took a sight on the bold stripes of the man's day jerkin, two hundred yards ahead. He eased his own car up to a smooth eighty and slowed down alongside the other, cruising at fifty. Philip sounded his horn—two short blasts, a long, a short—in the recognized prepare-to-proof signal.

The man turned—and actually *scowled*. More than that, he accelerated without answering the signal. As if proofing weren't a perfectly sociable act! It tested shields—of both drivers—when they might become suspect from disuse. And psychiatrists recommended it highly as a harmless means of working off any lingering aggressive tendencies.

Not that the mid-twenty-second century male had much aggressiveness left in his makeup. He might make a lot of play of it, in his bright totemic day jerkin or night cloak, but aggressiveness sprang largely from fear. And fear of violence—something that had been growing to panic proportions by the early twenty-hundreds—had been excised forever by the invention of power shields.

Well, if that was the way he wanted it, Philip thought. He could easily have picked a more co-operative driver, but the discourtesy rankled. He put his foot down and caught up again within seconds.

The man made no attempt to slow, driving on with his face set fiercely ahead. Philip grinned and swung in a sharper arc than he would have normally.

The man turned now, his face white, as the Cheetah's shield clashed whiningly with his own. The Whippet ricocheted and hit the side-shields of the highway. At that speed it must have been an unnerving experience, for they were on a flyover now, with a hundred-foot drop below—and the road shield was as invisible as any other. Or as nearly invisible as mattered. One could just detect in any shield, at the right angle to the light—a little more in some lights than others—the shimmer of polarized atoms, a subharmonic of their frantically rigid dance.

Philip had to swing out as the Whippet bounced back, its driver twitching in his effort to straighten out. He overcompensated—even '48 Whippets had pretty effective touch steering—and

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swung out to the edge again. Philip caught him at the second bounce and had fun riding alongside, screens touching to a shrill music. The other *had* to slow down.

Philip waved cheerfully and sounded the customary long-short sign-off. The other driver only raised a hand in an obscene gesture. Philip grinned, a little smugly. Imagine being a member of a clan that would admit an ingrate like that!

He threaded through downtown traffic and lined up at the Peacock Building. It wasn't a long queue. He was keen and always arrived early—never later than ten-thirty. The vehicles in front were latecomers of lower rank. They crab-steered aside for him.

Inside, he went up to his studio.

The conference for the Elephant account had been set for eleven-fifteen. The intervening time could be spent tidying up work on lesser accounts. He uncovered his easel, the screen sliding back at a touch.

It was a creation in depth for a stereo commercial. He had set up the matrices the day before, without taking conscious note of the product, for it was only a standard low-rate graphic. Now he saw that it was to promote a food product—a Bee Clan account—and this one a pretty hopeless line, he would have thought, to push in this day and age. Who in their right minds would prefer Naturpur Cereal—*Straight from the Farm to Your Table*—when there was such a wide range of synthetics, incomparably more delicious, on the market? Or be induced to buy a slogan like that? *Farm* conjured up too many images, all bad, of stench and dirt and inefficiency. *Food Station* would have been much better.

But picking slogans wasn't his job. This one had been passed downstairs, perhaps for the very reason that he disliked it—to appeal to cranks. There must still be a few about. He thought of the man in the Whippet and felt a twinge of sympathy. Perhaps Naturpur Cereal was *his* baby. He could be excused his anti-social behavior, if so.

But Philip attacked the job with his usual attention to detail. He chose an ancient face: rustic—what could have been more appropriate?—and keyed it in to the middle of the matrix. But that was overdoing it, he realized immediately. He punched the cancel key and tried again, this time with a classic cursive.

Not enough impact. He muttered under his breath and canceled again. He lit a cigarette and brooded. These piddling jobs could sometimes be bothersome out of all proportion to their size.

He tried two more: a block capital and—out of some perverse streak of humor—cockroach type-

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writer, before hitting on one that seemed suited—a direct blow-up of an old face, Poliphilus, showing all the jagged edge of a type actually impressed on paper.

That was much better. It made even NATURPUR in caps and the words of its absurd slogan appear to have significance. He chose a deceptively restful blue for the slogan and overlaid it with a wavy yellow pattern in Knight Screen Three O Six Nine, congratulating himself on his instinctive judgment. If they wanted the impression of wheat, or some such ghastly cereal, waving in the breeze, that gave it perfectly.

He switched on the recede-advance, adjusting the swing to a nicety. First the letters of the slogan, then the screen pattern over it, the letters breaking through again and—he turned a knob—coming up to fill the entire image area. He was tempted to slip in a subliminal NATURPUR under the process, but rejected it as unworthy, even for this. He contented himself with a quick fade-in of the brand name in red, let the slogan be reasserted for one point three seconds, then brought the name back for a final two point two in shimmer halo.

He ran the proof through. Not at all a bad job for a ten-second quickie. Back downstairs they would match in some appropriate music from the banks. He pushed the print key. While the machine ran it in triplicate tape, he made out his cost sheet for the job, using for the first and only time in the entire operation a hand tool of his craft—a pen.

The tape machine sighed to a stop, and a light flicked from red to blue. He took out the tapes, filed one away in his records and put the other two in the chute. As he turned away, his intercom buzzed. He flipped the switch.

R.G.'s secretary appeared on the screen.

"Mr. Gotfryd is ready for the conference, Mr. Tawn."

He arrived to find most of them already there, with Randall Gotfryd, large and resplendent in an opulex day jerkin, at the head of the conference table. By the time Philip had said "Pride to the Peacocks" and seated himself, the last two—Jenkins from Music and Franz from Motivation—had arrived. R.G. lit a fresh cigar.

The murmurs died away as he doused his lighter.

"Very well, gentlemen. You don't need reminding of the importance of this account. Which is why we're giving it the top inspirational treatment."—It was R.G.'s term for this kind of approach, where every department —not just Motivation or Top Office—set up their ideas . . . to be shot down or discussed. "We laid down the broad approach lines at the first conference. The

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whole emphasis must be on the desirability of having one of the Elephants' new personal machines —their *lovableness.*"

He had used the same word last time, but the same deferential laughter greeted it again.

"No status, no plugging away at clan rank, we agreed about that. This has got to be something much more immediate—as the product is. Something that gives *completeness.* A portable computer, weighing less than five pounds and vocalized. The friend to consult on every decision, with a library of tapes on every subject.

"I'll update you on developments. One in particular. The Elephants aren't alone in the field. Since our last meeting, word has come to my ears that the Owls are readying a machine on the same lines. That only reinforces my words on the importance of this campaign. The Owls have hired the Zebras—"

Laughter again, this time edged with derision.

R.G. raised a large hand.

"Some of you *could* find yourselves laughing all the way down to the Street."

The laughter stopped abruptly. "The Street" in that context meant out of the clan. It was hardly a threat to be taken seriously; once you were in a clan it was almost impossible to get voted out. Demoted, yes—but clan loyalty was a large thing. All the same, the words raised uneasy echoes out of history—a history that was not all that distant.

"That's better. The Zebras may be an upstart clan, with some pretty wild people working for them. But they've also got some very solid talent—talent that I wouldn't mind having here. Another piece of private information came to my ears recently—their accounts for the year just ended. They're grossing nearly forty percent of our figures. So no complacency—and no cracks about their being a strictly black-and-white outfit. They'll be breathing down our necks soon enough if we don't all keep on our toes."

The scowl disappeared.

"But I'm confident that we've got a head start on this machine. They're calling theirs the Oracle and pushing the gadget angle. That means, I'm convinced, that they're missing out right from the start. There are enough gadgets in this world. All right, there'll be plenty more, and we'll be right in the forefront selling them, but there's a limit to the pulling power of that theme. *People,* not machines, is that clearly understood? All right—Burnside, you first. What has your team cooked up?"

Burnside of Copy coughed and opened his folder.

"I think we've hit just the right note, R.G. How's this? *You're Never Alone With A Friend.*" He looked up expectantly.

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The hopeful expression evaporated.

"*That's* a slogan?" said R.G. acidly. "It was used two hundred years ago." He stabbed buttons. There was an uneasy silence for the seconds it took for a prompt slip, out of the commodious Peacock data banks, to arrive at his elbow. "I thought so. It was used to promote a cigarette by a British agency back in the nineteen fifties."

Burnside spread his hands. "Honest to God, R.G., I wasn't plagiarizing. And *two hundred years!* The public hasn't got your long memory."

"Nor have you, obviously. Nor have you read your histories of advertising lately. That campaign was one of the flops of all time. Because it broke the simple rule of negatives. Stress what your product counters and you're planting a negative image. That secondhand slogan of yours will work all right —it'll make people uneasy, feel that they're somehow defective in *needing* a Friend."

Burnside winced. "Sorry, Chief. We've got others. How about: *The Friend—A Man's Best Friend?*"

"Marvelous! *That* cuts right across the mother image. *And* the clan image."

Burnside fidgeted with his collar. "I thought they were the crispest. How about: *Never Before A Friend Like A Friend?*"

"*Hm-mm.*" R.G. rolled the phrase round his tongue as if it were a dubious vintage. "Well, it's *something*. Even if it doesn't seem to lead to anything. But it could, I suppose. The rest of you, make a note of it. But let's hope that we get a more fertile idea than that before we're through here."

Burnside sat back, sweating, for all clan loyalty. Philip felt relieved. After that, R.G. couldn't possibly be as tough on anyone else. He was wrong, and it took him a very short time to find out. Gotfyrd stabbed a finger straight at him.

He opened his folder confidently, took out a sketch and placed it on the projector plate in front of him. It came out, magnified twenty times, on the room screen.

Everybody waited for R.G.'s reaction.

It came. He exploded.

"And what the hell's *that*?"

"It's a modified mandala—a Jung-Preston shape. You don't get the full effect, anything like it, in still. But I've got it all worked out. I've prepared a complete series. I know they're abstract, but they express the whole idea of friendship . . . don't you feel that? Animated, they'll—"

"What! A standard animation for an outfit of Elephant's status!"

"That's the whole point, R.G. Each one will be animated frame by frame. Tailored to go straight to the subconscious. It's a technique that nobody's *started* to ex-

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plore yet. The kind of brand-new approach to go with a brand-new product like the Friend."

"Frame-by-frame animation! Do you realize what that would cost?"

"But, R.G., you just said that it had to match Elephant's status."

"Don't twist my words, Tawn! Elephant, being a computer clan, pride themselves on their costing. Not that they're penny-pinching, but they've got to see *value* for their money. They've budgeted ten million on this campaign. You seriously expect me to go to them with a handful of colored prints!"

Philip made a last desperate attempt. "They *could* be keyed in with live sequences."

"They'll be keyed in with nothing. Live sequences are what I wanted—the human angle. Didn't I stress that enough at our last conference?"

"But this is the *direct* human angle. I discussed it with Charlie Franz." Franz looked down at his fingernails. "He went along with —"

He stopped dead against the warning glare from Gotfryd.

"If that's all from the Creative Arts Department," R.G. said heavily, "we'll move on to Statistics. Perhaps even in the higher planes of mathematics we'll find some simple common-sense."

The conference broke up at twelve-fifty with nothing very definite having crystallized out. Philip got up and was making his way out when Gotfryd called, "Tawn!" Philip turned. "I'd like a word with you. In private."

Philip caught a wincing glance or two from the others as they filtered out of the room. When it was empty, except for the two of them, Gotfryd said:

"Sorry I had to ride you like that, Phil. But you know that I can't seem to be giving you any preferential treatment, just because you're my prospective son-in-law."

"I understand that," Philip murmured.

"I *hope* you do. They can say what they like about me, but one thing they can't say is that anybody holds a job down in this office except on merit. But I didn't keep you back just to say that. That was one *hell* of a lousy effort of yours."

Philip hoisted his shoulders. "I thought it was an experiment worth making. We have to keep pushing out the technique frontiers."

"Granted. I picked you for your fresh approach. But where's your sense of values? Try something like that on a small account first."

"But that wouldn't be feasible, R.G., on economic grounds. I spent a lot of time on those Elephant designs."

"That's another thing," said Gotfryd, glowering.

"Mostly my own," Philip added.

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"So that's it, is it? Freda's complained more than once lately that you haven't been showing her proper attention. Well, not *complained* . . . she's not that kind of a person. But it's been pretty obvious to her mother and me. That's no way to treat a fine girl like Freda."

"I'm sorry, R.G.," Philip muttered.

"And you haven't attended the last two Lodge meetings. Those things get noticed, you know. And reflect on me as your sponsor to the Top Peacocks. I suppose you've got the same excuse for *that*. I appreciate a man's attention to his work—however misguided in this instance—but balance, Phil, *balance*."

"Perhaps I did go overboard on this idea. I saw it as a chance to try something really new."

"You said that." R.G. looked at him shrewdly. "I don't think that was the real reason at all—but the opposite. A chance to do some handwork. Isn't that so?"

Philip hadn't admitted it to himself until now.

"An artist has to go back to the basics occasionally."

Gotfryd put a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

"You'll get over it, son. My first three years here, I worked away evenings on a novel that was going to shake the world. I sent it to every transcription clan in town. It was only when it came back from the last one, a year later, that I could see it as something separate from myself. I started to read it through—then I fed it page by page into the destructor. I was cut up at the time, I can tell you. But I got my first big promotion inside six months. Do you get the message?"

"I get the message."

"I don't mean you should give up painting entirely. Mrs. Bleckendorf was very pleased with that set of skyscapes you did for her."

Philip flinched from the memory. They had been the purest hack work to please the wife of a clan elder.

"Which reminds me. You'll be at her party this evening? A lot of important people from the media clans will be attending."

"I'll be there. I've promised to pick Freda up at nine."

"Good. And you'll remember my words?"

"Yes, R.G."

"Then you won't go far wrong." R.G. looked at his wrist. "That's that, then. I'd have you at my table for lunch today, but I'm lunching with the Elephant top brass at their place."

He turned at the door. "Though Lord knows what I'm going to tell them. But I'll think of something on the way over. And you'll work away on it?"

"I'll certainly—" Philip began to say, but Randall Gotfryd had disappeared through the doorway.

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Events had started to move toward an invisible crux. Somebody compiling a dossier on the case of Philip Tawn would certainly have noted the events of the morning, but as nothing more than one of those tough sessions that come to every career man, to be assimilated in the larger pattern of success. It was what he did next that would have placed the first query mark against his conduct.

He took his personal shield pack out of his car and went out to eat —the first time he had lunched outside the Peacock Building in six months. Not that there was anything dubious in that; the reverse. It was psychologically healthy for a man to move outside the clan sometimes. It was what he did on the way that would have been considered suspect.

The restaurant—a place that specialized in protein steaks—was two blocks away. As he went along he toyed absent-mindedly with the controls at his belt. He must have walked a full hundred yards before he realized, with a start, that all that distance he had been without the protection of his shield.

Appalled, he immediately clicked the switch on again. A hoodlum car could have been prowling with shield detectors at the alert. Accidents happened sometimes, even in a world as well ordered as this.

But he felt strangely, perversely, elated. He walked with almost a swagger into the restaurant reception room. And he was actually whistling as he switched off his shield and presented himself to the arms detector . . .

The evening started well enough. Freda showed none of the resentment that her father had imputed to her. She looked dazzling in a pajama outfit in white, a Peacock motif repeated, with subtle variations, all over in gold. She admired his own formal suit in dark green, with the discreet clan badge at the breast pocket.

They strolled arm-in-arm down the corridors to the Bleckendorfs'. They arrived to find a cluster of visiting clanspeople checking in their boldly patterned cloaks. They had already been screened at the guest port thirty stories below. It was an interclan courtesy, mitigating that essential and electronic ritual, not to discloak until actually arriving at the door of one's host.

Philip and Freda waited politely while Marjorie Bleckendorf, in purple with large peacock eyes emblazoned, greeted her guests by a stentor table. Invitations were inserted. The machine scanned the details and first announced the names in an undertone for the hostess's benefit, then, as they passed on, ringingly for the company—and for George Bleckendorf, who lurked behind his wife, his lined old face showing the ef-

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fort he was making, not very successfully, to be cordial. But George Bleckendorf was a character, and was accepted as such. In his day he had been a very big wheel in advertising.

As Philip and Freda stopped by him, he snarled, "Blasted stentor machines! Marge said she got one because I was hard of hearing. Confounded cheek! I *will* be if that thing keeps squawking in my ear. How are you, Freda? And Philip?" His beady old eyes lit up maliciously. "How's the Elephant account going?"

"Great guns," Philip said, doing his best to sound airy.

Bleckendorf chuckled. "Watch your metaphors, lad! Hardly one to use in relation to Elephants. Talking of which, my throat's as dry as the hide of one."

Philip took the hint and got a martini for himself as well from the dispenser at the bar. Freda ushered him over to meet friends. They were all women, chattering away on women's things. He hung around, feeling superfluous, waiting for a break in the babble.

It came, abruptly, when Gloria Paston was announced. She sailed in, in a shrieking blue and green dress that stopped a long way above her knees—and started not much higher up.

The room fell silent, all heads turned, before—embarrassed by the simultaneity — everyone simultaneously resumed talking.

"*We-ell!*" exclaimed one friend of Freda's. "Did you ever see?"

"You wouldn't see me *dead* in anything so vulgar," said a thin girl whose name, Philip vaguely remembered, was Hope. He didn't fancy the thought of seeing her alive in it.

"I don't know," a woman in orange evening breeches said wistfully. "I hear they're all the rage among the Lions. I bet inside a month or—"

"It's not the *length*," said Freda. The big blonde Paston woman had her back turned, surrounded by a cluster of men. "I do believe . . ." She sneaked across the room, took a covert look at the dress and came back, exultingly scandalized. "*Yes* —it's actually got *real* peacock feathers in it."

"Oh *no*!"

"Wherever could she have got them from?"

"That's breaking the first rule."

"And in front of all these other clanspeople!"

"We'll have to report this at the next guild meeting," Hope said firmly.

Philip could stand no more. The protocol of clan dress was as formal as the rules of ancient Chinese art. The first rule—that no actual part of the creature should be used—went back to much more primitive roots of totem and taboo. It was part of the clutter that had accreted round the idea of clanship; round the shift of per-

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spective that the advent of power shields had brought about. He himself found this aspect of it tiresome to a degree.

He drifted off without Freda even noticing. He propped himself up at the bar, communing with the dials of the drinks dispenser. He downed two large martinis in rapid succession. They made him feel only slightly better.

George Bleckendorf stopped momentarily by him, glass in hand, to say: "Bloody women! They said for years we were becoming a matriarchy. We're one now, all right. Oh, have you met Ray Donovan?" He flapped a hand over Philip's shoulder and drifted on.

Philip turned to meet his neighbor at the bar, feeling his first stir of interest of the evening.

"Not *the* Ray Donovan? I didn't hear you announced."

The gangling crewcut figure with the Ant badge raised a finger to his lips, patently a bit tipsy.

"*Sh-sh*. It's a pen name. And I was first here, anyway. I'm always first at parties, even ones as crum —" His eyes focussed on Philip's badge, and he smirked. "Pride to the Peacocks."

Philip took no umbrage. Ants always regarded themselves as higher up the creative ladder than Peacocks. They were welcome to the conceit. In fact, their work was just as geared to the machine. But this man had scripted a notorious stereo serial a couple of years back. *The Rat Clan* was supposed to have been imaginary, but lots of guesses had been made about its identity. Naturally, the majority had plumped for the Ants. The mores, recorded in minute detail, had been lurid. There had been rumors that the author had been hauled up before his Clan Council and expelled. Certainly the Ants had closed ranks, and nobody was sure just who Ray Donovan was or what he looked like.

This man could be a faker, of course. But Bleckendorf was too canny to be taken in by a hoax—unless he were a party to it. But that wouldn't have been his style. George had a wicked sense of humor, but he kept it in check at his wife's gatherings.

"Are you working on a new one?" Philip asked politely.

"Only one that'll make the last one look like *Little Women*."

"The same kind of theme, then?"

A finger jabbed out at him. "When Donovan treats a theme, it's exhausted. Wrung out. There's no clan worthy of my attention now." His eyes ranged over the gathering with a look of scorn.

Philip waited for the other's attention to return. When it didn't, he prompted: "But *everybody* lives in clans. Unless it's about hoodlums. Or historical."

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Donovan swung back. "That's typical! So there are only two types of people nowadays—the ones in clans, and hoods? Brother!"

"Well, everyone knows there're a few people outside who—"

"A few! Do you know just how many people exist without clan membership, without a shield, in this day and age?"

"I—no, I'm afraid I don't."

"Nor does anybody. Because nobody cares enough to keep records. I'll tell you. More than twenty million."

"Well, I suppose there could be. Out in the country . . ." Philip waved vaguely.

Donovan laughed hollowly. "The country! That's just a network of food stations and phony resorts. All shielded. It's a wasteland in between. No, that figure's for the cities."

His knowledgeable manner grated. Philip found himself resisting it.

"If nobody keeps records, how can you be so sure of the figure?"

"We got sampling shots. Then it was just a matter of scaling up by area."

"You mean . . . you actually went down there?"

"What—in the flesh! Do you take me for some kind of an idiot?"

"Inside a shield . . ."

"*Huh*—you'd find a shield a fat lot of good! We sent three robot cameras down there. If you were a human, they'd just hem you in and starve you out, no matter how many food pellets you stowed in your belt. With the robots they blacked them out with smoke-gas, then shoved them along and into the river. The second one we had fitted with caterpillar treads and engines to match, but that finished up two hundred feet down in the mud like the first. We located it—it was still transmitting—but we could hardly send a gang down there to retrieve it, could we?

"The third one got back—by courtesy of an inter-gang war that broke out among the cars clustered round it. And we had infrared cameras fitted on that one. We got some hair-raising pictures of a hoodlum battle in full blast."

"How do they fight? If they've all got shields?"

Donovan raised a fresh glass and leered.

"Now, that would be telling, wouldn't it? You'll be seeing it all on your screens in due course. Real shots like that, mixed with reconstructions for the human angle."

He downed his drink in a ferocious gulp and wiped his lips with the back of a hand.

"Have you ever imagined what it would be like to live from day to day without a shield? Like the old days, only a hundred times worse? Mob riots, people suddenly running amok. And all the time at the mercy of hoodlum gangs. Man—*that's* the naked life."

A look of annoyance flickered

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across his face, and Philip—despite being a bit high himself by now—realized that the other had just let slip the projected title of the series. Donovan talked past it quickly. "All you millions of people behind your smug little personal shields and car shields and house shields are living in a womb."

Philip was conscious of somebody leaning into the conversation—a thin man with a blank face. The face became animated now.

"Nonsense! If people care to live like that, it's their own fault. Any man's got a right to a shield. And any man worth his salt can get hold of one. Millions are made every year."

Donovan wheeled lurchingly on him.

"And do you know how much a shield costs?"

"I surely do. You can see my badge; I'm a Turtle. A standard personal shield, atomic pack included, costs two thousand three hundred, tax paid. And prices go down every year."

"Do they now? Well, the chances of an outcast being able to buy one also go down every year. Every day. Milked dry by hoods at threat of his life—what chance do you think anybody down there's got to save that kind of money?"

"He can still apply for membership in a clan, at ground level. Millions of lower status clanspeople have never bought a shield in their lives. They don't have to, because they never leave the clan house." He coughed. "That doesn't happen in the Turtles, of course. And I've been pressing my chiefs to mount an all-out campaign on the hard core in other clans. But the fact remains—"

Philip knew that he ought to exploit the opening and put in some smart talk on behalf of a Peacock promotion, but found himself feeling singularly unzealous.

The lanky scriptwriter, for his part, had turned away in distaste from the Turtle. Now he swung back.

"Don't you think I've researched that? Every inferior job in clans is filled. I *know,* brother, I tested it. I applied to a dozen for admission."

"They probably detected that you didn't really want admission," countered the Turtle. "They certainly would have in our clan. We've got some pretty efficient screening procedures."

"Impregnability to the Turtles and all that—" Donovan was getting obviously drunk by now—"but personally I wouldn't want to be a member of a clan that capitalized on a situation like that."

"Concord to the Ants," said the Turtle, red in the face, "and let me tell you that our Vice-Chief himself is a third-generation ground entrant. His grandfather

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was a barber shop machine operator."

"I didn't mean that," said Donovan, his voice loud. "And you know I didn't. I mean the situation—" he waved a hand—"*down there.* If your lot had any human decency they'd go down there and distribute shields free to the needy."

A few heads turned, among them Freda's father. His look wasn't pleasant. He was in a group of top brass from the Swallows.

Philip felt a sudden perverse impulse to join in with Donovan and the Turtle and have a real slanging match—hedged in, of course, by inter-clan formalities, but *they* could be used to cutting effect—and really scandalize R.G. But he couldn't summon the necessary enthusiasm. One had to have a certain liking even for one's adversaries, and he couldn't warm to the machine-like clan loyalty of the Turtle. And he fancied that Donovan, for all his lofty protestations of concern on behalf of suffering humanity beyond the shields, was only concerned with the exploitation of the situation for his own ends, for the synthetic emotion he could wring out of it.

He drifted away from the pair, murmuring formal phrases which neither of them heard, and taking a fresh drink from the bar dispenser on the way. He intended to find Freda; instead, he found himself facing Gloria Paston.

"Why, hel-*lo*," she breathed. "Where have you been hiding your georgeous self all this time?"

Philip, looking back on that fateful evening, would never remember just what he said in reply, but it made the Paston woman chuckle throatily and *rub*—there was no other word for it—her magnificent body against him. He would remember that he got her a drink—and another for himself—that he found himself sharing a sofa with her in a shadowy corner of the room; that, some time after—he would certainly remember that—he looked up into the aghast eyes of Freda.

"Hello, honey," he said blithely. "Do you know Gloria—"

But Freda had turned on her heel and was stalking off.

"Pardon me," he said to the blonde, and lurched to his feet. He caught up with Freda by the door, but not before stumbling over somebody's feet and causing a chain-reaction through the crowded room.

He grabbed her by the arm.

"What's all the indignation in aid of? I was only having a drink with her."

"*Only!* Why do you think she latched *on to you*? Because we'd put the word round to get her boycotted for that dress. You, as an artist, ought to appreciate that."

"What the hell has my being an artist got to do with it?"

"You ought to have enough

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taste, that's why." She detached her arm. "But I'm not arguing with you. I'm leaving."

Everything came to a focus then —despite the fact that his eyes could only do so by an effort. But his words were clear and vehement as he said, "Bloody well do as you like," and he turned and pushed his way back to the bar.

As he passed, R.G. said grimly, "I'll see you at the office tomorrow." Philip stalked loftily on and dialled himself another drink.

He took it out on the balcony. Gloria Paston was there. She gave him a gratified smile and came close to him.

But at this moment he wasn't interested. He looked out over the city, past the great clan blocks— a million lights shining inside the faint night-haloes of their shields —out past the business and factory sections, to the hinterland beyond. To a dark section, defined only by the lights of the surrounding areas and the river. Within that section only a few scattered lights shone. As he watched, a red glow woke and died. A bomb blast? He waited for the noise, but none reached him across the intervening distance.

It was at that point that Philip Tawn ran amok. As men had once in the primitive world before shields. All the resentments that, until this moment, he had never realized he felt—against his job, against being an artist in a world that demanded machine-minders, against a fiancé who filled her waking hours with feuds and senseless points of formality, against *everything*—exploded.

But he ran amok—such being the world in which he lived—with the utmost probity, within himself. He handed his glass to the Paston woman and walked quietly out of the apartment, without this time stumbling over a single foot.

He sat in a frowzy all-night bar on the edge of the factory section. Faint light was streaking the horizon. He had on a day suit from which he had snipped the badge before leaving his apartment. His clan cloak and shield were in the poky reception cubicle of this place; his car was in a garage three blocks away.

He felt free, as he never had in his life before. It couldn't last . . . no more than a few hours . . . but it was a heady feeling, replacing the effects of the drinks he had had at the party. Those had worn off by now; the tablet he had taken beforehand took care of that and any danger of a hangover. Now the world of clan parties and precautionary tablets and little Friends seemed a universe away. He was ready to take the last step.

He flung some coins on the table and went out. He passed through the cubicle and was deadly calm as the exit door slid back and he walked straight through, without

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checking out either his cloak or his shield. The monitor's voice squawked out a canned reminder, to be cut off abruptly as the door slid shut behind him.

And he was alone in the world —defenseless.

A shiver ran through him, and he told himself that it was only the cold of dawn upon his cloakless frame. The great blocks of the skyline looked as if they had been cut out by giant shears. He turned his back on them and walked toward the wilderness.

Nobody else shared the street with him. It vanished into a pile of rubble. He skirted it and knew that he had reached his destination.

He remembered pictures from old films of slums, only this was worse. Lampposts had been sawn off or uprooted bodily. The crumbling houses had few panes of glass left. Sacking had been stretched over as a substitute. Basement areas gaped up to the street from behind barricades of earth and rusting wire. Over all hung a smell of decay.

And he had an overpowering sense of eyes watching him.

A green car accelerated out of nowhere, screaming around a corner, zooming in evil faces to his, shuddering to a stop a few feet from him.

He turned and ran.

Behind him the car engine whined back to life, there was a scream of tires. He pounded on, dodging piles of rubble, praying that they would slow the progress of the hoodlums' car. But it kept on coming. His lungs were aching as he squeezed through a gap in a ruined wall, and out into a junkland beyond.

He scuttled between tumbled blocks of masonry to put as much distance between himself and the hoods as he could find. He stumbled out into a street, or what remained of one . . . and the car was waiting for him, the faces. The thudding of his heart and lungs must have blanketed the sound of its engine as the car had swept to cut him off. Unless this were another, identical one.

But there was no time to debate the point. Senseless now to scuttle back into the junkland; they could soon wear him out by such cat-and-mouse maneuvering. There was another opening in the wall fifty yards away. There might be an escape route there. Desperately he turned and made a break for it.

And knew that he would never reach it.

He stopped, turned, spread-eagled against the wall. The car bore down on him. He closed his eyes against the red shock of death.

There was a squeal of brakes—and the impact stopped short of destruction. Every muscle in his body had been tensed. A lifetime behind shields had sapped them; even so, the blow barely winded him.

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He opened his eyes. He was pinned against the wall, a foot from the car's bumper. The three hoods looked out at him with eyes like dark glasses. The driver reached down, and the pressure against Philip stopped abruptly. The driver leaped out, a repeater cannon in his fist, covering the street behind the car. The other two climbed out, carrying automatic pistols.

One gestured. There was no mistaking the meaning. Philip made to comply, to strip off his jerkin, but—summoning up all the strength he had left—swung a punch at the hood. He ducked it with ridiculous ease, said "Naughty, *naughty*" and beckoned with finger and thumb.

There was nothing else for it. Philip stripped off his jerkin.

The hood grabbed it and searched the pockets, while still keeping his gun on him. His mate, squat and hairy, ran his hands over Philip. He swiftly found the small wad of bills in his hip pocket and held them up, riffling them with practiced fingers.

"A good start to the day," his mate observed, fingering the material of Philip's jerkin.

The squat one snatched it from him and flung it back at Philip, who put it on again, gratefully in the morning chill. "Two hundred and forty," he growled. Philip felt reality wavering as the hood thrust half the wad back at him.

"Whaddya want—more than fifty percent? Where you from, anyway? You'll soon learn!"

The hood reached in a pocket of his own jerkin and lunged at Philip's forehead. "You're under Bear protection from now on." He fiddled at the rubber stamp. "Pull your sleeve back." A rough head and 120 in numerals were stamped on Philip's wrist in green.

"You got the same Bear's head mark on your forehead. That commands a lot of respect round here. Any trouble, you call us. Like Wolves or Apes musclin' in."

"Where—how do I call you?"

The hood smirked. "Just yell. We're always around."

They got back in the car. It backed in one swift arc and wheeled away. Philip stood there in a daze. Surprises had come too fast—surprise number one being that he was still alive.

He shook himself, finally, and moved on.

The streets were waking now. Basements were being opened up and goods put out on stalls. He had never seen anything like this, except in ancient films or transcriptions. Twice a year the guildswomen of the Peacocks held a rummage sale for lowlier members of the clan. But that was more of an exercise in internal economy —in surplus disposal—than anything else. And totally artificial.

Here fresh fruit was being arrayed; sides of meat; rolls of cloth;

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junk. And people were filtering out of the houses to buy. They seemed unafraid—and surprisingly well dressed. Nothing so neat—or stereotyped—as clan dress, but he had expected to find them in rags.

He walked along, fascinated.

He had barely passed out of the market street when another car, a red one, bore down on him. This time he neither closed his eyes nor ran.

Three hoods—it seemed to be the standard complement—got out.

He had survived an hour in this world. If he were to survive for much longer he would have to start learning its customs—if only by trial and error. He pointed to his forehead.

The hoods scowled; one still came to search him. Philip shoved him back and bared his wrist. Undeterred, the hood reached out and tore open his jerkin.

And Philip—there being nothing else for it—*yelled*. His experience here, brief as it was, shaped the word on his lips: "Bear!"

The jerkin was off his back.

"Bear!"

A gun spoke from somewhere. The hood holding the jerkin dropped to a knee, grabbing at his wrist and cursing. Philip snatched the jerkin back before it became stained with blood.

The guard hood wheeled and sprayed masonry with shells. The invisible gun barked again and he spun, the repeater cannon flying from his hands. When he recovered his balance his right arm was dangling, and a red stain was spreading at the shoulder.

All three of them bolted back into the car, the third hood grabbing up the scattered armory on the way. They were barely in their seats when another car, a green one, hurtled round a corner. Philip scuttled for cover, flattening himself into a doorway. He looked out.

The two cars were drawn up facing each other. He remembered Donovan's words at the party. Was the kind of battle he claimed to have filmed about to take place?

The two cars bore down on each other, like bison charging, and rebounded violently from the impact of their shields. Philip felt a sense of anticlimax. Was this to be all? Merely a succession of head-on collisions?

Then he knew that it had been only a throwing down of the gauntlet, for now they drew back, and a cannon jutted from the open front of each car. The shields were just visible in the level rays of the morning sun—then clearly visible as both started to flicker. With a kind of iridescence. The cannons erupted with a roar.

For a moment he thought that something had gone wrong with both shields simultaneously. But that would have been against all

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the odds. They had to be working, from the number of shells that were ricocheting around. Nobody's aim could be *that* bad. The two cars were only forty feet from each other.

A shell whanged off the brickwork above him, showering him with ochre dust, at the moment that a memory clicked—from a stereo serial he had seen when he was a kid. Flyers in the First World War had used something like this—guns synchronized to shoot through the sweep of their airscrews. A shield now was as much a barrier to violence from within as without.

The bonnet of the green car went up in a burst of metal. A shell had obviously got through a split-second interstice in its shield. He felt a pang of remorse, the waking of a new and strange loyalty. A Bear car—if the colors had the meaning he thought they did—it had come to his aid. And now . . . three heads lifted unbloodied from it, but their cannon mounting was shot away, their shield gone. They were helpless. There was a deafening blast.

Through a noise in his ears like cymbals clashing, a voice said, "Come on." It was a woman's voice—a woman's figure, undeniably so even in shirt and jeans, that brushed past him.

Just when he thought that he had begun to make some kind of sense out of things, they had gone crazy on him again. The green car was still there. But the red one was tipped over, its occupants sprawled. One of them was half out of it at an impossible angle, screaming curses, one hand outthrust against the weight of his body. The fingers were missing from the hand, and blood was an iridescent whirl about it. Philip felt sick. Something else had found an interstice in a shield.

One of the other hoods must have found the shield switch. The man slumped to the ground as the flickering stopped abruptly. The girl in jeans was standing over the car, something lifted in her hand . . . a grenade.

A wad of bills was thrown out of the red car. The girl stooped quickly to pick it up, then moved to the green car. Another wad was already lying on the ground. The girl grinned, her teeth white against the brown of her face. She stuffed the money into her belt.

Philip had come out of cover, shaking the dust out of hair and eyes. The girl beckoned him urgently. He went to her.

"Let's move," she said. She took him by the arm and hurried him out of the street. As they rounded a corner, gunfire started up behind them.

"What—what happened?" he asked dazedly.

"I lobbed a stick of dynamite at the Ape car. You can't crack a shield, of course, but you can tip

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a car over, with luck, if you aim low."

She was quite composed. He stopped in his tracks. She looked so slender, fragile almost.

"What are you? Some kind of free-lance assassin?"

She doubled up in laughter. He noticed a wolf's head in faint mauve against her suntanned forehead.

"I don't get it. Surely I'm an enemy too?"

She made as if to speak, but turned at the sound of a motor. A red car swung round a corner and screamed past them.

"Save your questions." She grabbed his arm. "Come on. It's not far away."

At the next block they turned and the girl stopped. She gestured down into an area.

He followed her down the steps, wondering what lay beyond the doorway. A gang hideout? But she guided him through the gloom to a corner table. It was a café.

"Two coffees," she hollered. They came with a speed that Philip had never encountered uptown. He took a sip and looked up.

"This is *good*." It was an understatement. He felt that he had never tasted coffee before.

"It should be. They only hijack the best. It's the water too, of course. Ever stop to think where the water comes from uptown? Better not. Down here the Wolves have drilled out a good supply."

"The *Wolves*? But they're just hoodlums." He bit his lip. "I'm sorry. I mean, like the Bears and the Apes. Aren't they?"

She smiled. "That's all right. I can tell you're new here. We make allowances. I guess that's why I —" She broke off.

"Why you what? Why you saw that I got clear back there?"

"That's right." *Why did she seem relieved*? "But you want to forget all that old clan loyalty junk. We don't owe *them* any loyalty. As for the question of the Wolves and the water supply—they've got to give some service for their money, haven't they? The same as the Bears with the power supply."

"Power?" He couldn't keep a pitying tone out of his voice. People had survived down here, but only barely. "There isn't even any street lighting."

"There are more important things. Power for the factories, for instance. They haven't got around to putting up lamp standards again yet. But they will."

"I should have thought the hoods could make money easier sticking people up."

"That's what *they* thought once. They soon learned to be reasonable."

"You call fifty percent *reasonable*? That's what they took off me before I'd been here five minutes."

"That's pretty normal. Hoods can spot a bare forehead blocks

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away. In theory a Bear squad can stop you any time and shake you down for half of anything you've got. In practice—well, if you think you're getting squeezed you can always appeal to your clan chiefs. It works out. Anyway, how much does an uptown clan member pay out of his salary in dues and taxes?"

He did a rough calculation. To the clan. The service clans. Ant license. Camel tax. The rest. "It must be nearly sixty percent."

"There you are then."

"But that Ape car was sticking me up for a cut, too."

"Now you know why nobody likes the Apes. You get these upstart clans from time to time. They don't last long. Any hood's fair game. Apes are just more so."

"*Fair game*! Don't you mean the other way round—we're fair game for them? Or does everybody here walk around with a hand grenade in one pocket and a stick of dynamite in the other?"

"Of course not. It's not exactly a habit of mine, either. But you'd be a bit slow not to take the chance when something like that happens outside your own door."

"But you're so *calm* about it all. From now on won't every Ape in the place be after you?"

"Highly unlikely. Both gangs in that little clash will be doing their best to forget my existence. The clan chiefs don't have much sympathy with bunglers."

He shook his head. "Everything's topsy-turvy here."

"Why? It might seem that way, coming straight from uptown. But *that's* where it's topsy-turvy. They didn't solve the problem of violence, only retreated from it. That only bred other things—conformity, sterility of ideas."

He realized that she was only putting into words his own feelings, the feelings that had come to a climax at that disastrous party. But the very fact of their being put so confidently made him feel sorry for her, made him protest them.

"That's easy to say if you've never known any other way of life. Anyone who—" He broke off. "Why are you laughing?"

"You jump to conclusions, don't you? I've only been here three years. I don't know the exact figure—they don't take censuses here—but I'd say that over half the people here are like me, ones who opted for this place. This kind of place in every town. We're in touch with other cities. And it's growing all the time. It's a movement. One by one people are coming out of the shielded uptowns. Aren't you one? Why did *you* make the break?" She flapped a hand. "Rhetorical question. We don't bother with people's reasons. It's enough that they made the break."

He smiled. "You sound like a member of a welcoming committee."

"Hardly that. I just happened

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to be around when the Apes stuck you up."

"*Wait*—I'm an idiot! Those shots—that was you too?"

She flushed—it was a charmingly incongruous sight—and dropped her eyes. "Anybody would have—"

"But you saved my life!"

She looked up, covering her embarrassment with a show of something close to anger.

"Can't you get it into your head that hoods only kill other hoods? We're their living. They *need* us."

"How do I know that's the truth?" He faltered. "I'm sorry—I mean—"

"What *do* you mean? That I had other motives?" She looked at him teasingly now.

He looked back at her. She wasn't beautiful by the formal standards of uptown—he tried to imagine Freda in this setting and failed—but beauty was relative. This girl, with her cropped fair hair and blue eyes, her direct manner, excited him.

The excitement died before a sense of his own inadequacy in a world like this—to a woman like this. He couldn't even show his gratitude.

He suddenly realized that he could. He got to his feet.

"Wait here."

"But—"

"Just wait. *Please.*" And he was out of the place before she could say anything more.

He stood in the cubicle of the bar that he had left that dawn, only a few hours before.

"The banks have been cleared," said the canned voice of the monitor. "There will be a servicing charge of five dollars. Kindly present your identity plastic."

It seemed so unreal now, this mechanical hedging around of even the small details of existence. But he presented his plastic, grateful that he still had it on him.

There was a series of clickings from behind the panel. "Insert five dollars now," said the robot voice. He complied. More clicking, then his shield pack materialized from a transitory hole in the counter top.

He picked up the pack and went out into the light of day.

He stood there. Nothing could be easier than to strap on the pack and walk to where his car was. Things could be smoothed over. So he would lose a year's promotion—it surely wouldn't be more. Clan loyalty and time would heal all wounds.

He could find the words to placate Freda. And he would have a great story to tell, of how he had dared life among the hoods without a shield. The next time he ran into Donovan he would be able to stuff that hack's words, his remote-control stories, straight down his throat. He could . . .

He stowed the pack, unactivated, under his jerkin and headed back into the wilderness.

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His eyes adjusted quicker to the gloom this time. The café was quite full now—but he couldn't see the girl. Another couple were seated at the corner table. He pushed his way to the counter.

"Where's—" He realized that he didn't even know her name. "The girl with the fair hair, in the check shirt?"

"Kim, you mean? She left a message. She's down at the Center."

"The Center?"

"Turn left out of the door. Two blocks down. You can't miss it."

Somebody came up the steps behind him and plucked at his sleeve. Philip turned. It was a sharp-faced runt of a man in a leather jacket.

"Pardon me, pal. I couldn't help seeing what you've got under your jerkin. When you leaned over the counter. Does it work?"

"Of course it—mind your own damn business," Philip told him. He set off down the street. The man tagged along beside him.

"Now, that's no way to be with a fellow clan member. I'm a Bear too. If you don't want the pack for yourself, I can give you a good price for it. Five hundred."

"I told you, I'm not interested."

"Six."

"Go to hell."

The man only fell back. Philip could hear his shuffling footsteps behind him. He put him out of his mind.

The man in the café had been right. You couldn't miss the Center; it was the only building standing in its street. But squads of workmen were toiling nearby, putting up what looked like a row of shops. The Center—a painted sign spelled it out in full as the Community Center—looked like an old warehouse. A coat of bright yellow paint over its brickwork did little to conceal its ancestry.

He went in. He could hear music. He pushed open swing doors and found himself in an auditorium. On the stage was an orchestra. In front stood the girl, Kim—*conducting it.*

He made his way down the aisle wonderingly.

It was a small orchestra, of no more than fifteen players. But that there should be an orchestra here at all was a startling enough fact. The music sounded raw to his ears after the smooth harmonies of electronic ensembles. Two trumpets were blaring to a rhythm punctuated by a tympani.

They cut off in mid-blast at a rap from the conductor's baton. Philip took his opportunity and called out to her.

She turned and half-smiled, half-frowned, as she saw him. She turned back to the orchestra. "Take it from the top of page four again."

Philip shrugged philosophically and sat down on the front bench. Some scores were lying on it, and a stub of pencil. He took the shield

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pack from his jerkin and laid it on the bench. He looked at the scores; they seemed to be only odd sheets. He picked up the pencil and began sketching on the backs of them to fill in the time.

His hand was unpracticed, but he soon became absorbed in rendering the angle of fingers to flute, the stance of Kim as she beckoned in the violins to a less strident passage.

The music stopped. He put the pencil and paper down guiltily as Kim said "Take ten" and came down from the stage. He stood up.

"How did it sound?" she asked.

"Pretty violent."

"All art is a kind of violence."

"Is it? I'd never thought of it that way before."

"Well, conflict then. Of an artist with his material, with his audience. And then a coming to terms. If the thing works, that is. I'm not sure yet that this does. It's only my second suite for orchestra."

"*You* wrote it?"

She looked apologetic. "We have to plug our own work a bit. We haven't got that many composers down here yet. And there's nothing worthy of the name of music being produced uptown."

"But I thought—"

"Thought what? Not still that I was a professional assassin?" She laughed, but only briefly, seeing the expression on his face. "I should have explained sooner. *This* is my work. My main work. Of course, anything any of us make on the side goes in the kitty. We should be self-supporting in a year or so. Until then we've got to survive."

To survive. He had forgotten. His ideas about her had suffered a violent reassessment. But that made what he could offer her all the more important. He reached down for the shield pack and held it out to her.

He was totally unprepared for her reaction. She stared at it, then thrust it back at him as if it were something unclean.

"Take it," he insisted. "I want to *help* you."

"I'm sorry." She took his arm. "You don't understand, do you? You will. Wear a shield down here and you're automatically one of *them*. Fair game. I told you—or tried to."

"*Hell!*" He flung the shield pack down on the bench. "Can't I do a thing right down here?"

"Don't be upset. I appreciate the thought. A shield does have a certain value down here. To a certain kind of person. You always get a few failures whose only ambition is to get into the hoodlum ranks."

"*Please,*" he said. "You're only making it worse."

"What are these?" He had forgotten to turn the score sheets over. She picked them up.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "I only used the backs."

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"That's all right. But these aren't bad."

"I was only doodling."

"Do you paint, too?"

"I used to."

"Well, that's something you can start doing right."

"You mean, people actually buy pictures down here?"

"Why not? They're coming to concerts."

"I'd need materials."

"You can get anything in the markets. Mind you, it might be difficult to get what you want *when* you want it. The same as us with instruments. You'd have to improvise."

"What's wrong with having to improvise?" He felt confidence burgeoning in him. He *could* make a start here. He looked down at the shield pack and felt suddenly like destroying it for the useless symbol it was. He had a better idea.

"Excuse me a minute."

He grabbed the pack and dashed up the aisle and into the street. The sharp-faced man was still hanging around.

"What did you say your top price was?"

"Seven hundred."

Philip was on the point of accepting, but reminded himself that he was in a tough world. A real world, a world where anything could happen, but a *tough* one. "I don't hear so well."

"Seven fifty," the other said. "You've got a deal."

Philip went back into the hall. The orchestra was back in rehearsal. The trumpets sounded fine.

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SCIENCE

THE SEVENTH METAL

by Isaac Asimov

As I MENTIONED SOME YEARS AGO (YOU, TOO, CAN SPEAK GAELIC, F & SF, March 1963), it is very difficult for an ivory-tower chemist such as myself to demonstrate competence in the practical aspects of the science. Consequently, it is always with a sinking heart that I watch anyone approaching me with a down-to-earth problem in chemistry. It always ends in a personal humiliation.

Well, not always.

Once, in the days when I was working toward my Ph.D., my wife came to me in alarm. "Something," she said, "has happened to my wedding ring."

I winced. I was still in my early stages as a chemist, but I had already had time to demonstrate my incompetence many times over. I didn't enjoy the prospect of having to do so again.

I said, "What happened?"

She eyed me censoriously. "It's turned into silver."

I stared at her with astonishment. "But that's impossible!"

She handed me the ring and, indeed, it had the appearance of silver, yet it was her gold wedding ring, inscription and all. She waited and I felt, uneasily, that she suspected I had bought her a ring of low-grade gold. Yet I could think of nothing!

I said, "I just can't explain this. Except for mercury, there's nothing in the world—"

"Mercury?" she said, with rising inflection. "How did you know about the mercury?"

I had apparently said the magic word. I saw instantly what had happened. Inflating my chest and putting on an air of lofty condescension, I said, "To the chemist's eye, my dear, it is at once obvious that what one has here is gold amalgam and that you've been handling mercury without removing your wedding ring first."

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That was it, of course. At the laboratory I had had access to mercury and was fascinated by it, so I brought home a small vial of it to amuse myself with now and then. (It rolls around in enticing fashion and doesn't wet anything.) My wife found the vial and couldn't resist pouring a drop into the palm of her hand so *she* could play with it. But she kept her wedding ring on, and mercury rapidly mixes with gold to form a silvery gold amalgam.

Yet despite this sadly dramatic and highly personal instance of mercury's fascination, I discussed the seven metals known to ancient man last month (THE FIRST METAL, December 1967) with hardly a word for the most unusual of them—mercury. But that wasn't neglect; I was merely saving it for an article of its own.

Mercury is riddled with exceptional characteristics. I am sure, for instance, that it was the least familiar of the seven metals and strongly suspect that it was the seventh metal (and the last) to be discovered by the ancients.

As for its being the least familiar, we might see what the Bible has to say about it, if only because it is a long and intricate book written by people who had little or no interest in science. It might be considered the authentic voice of the ancient non-scientist.

Gold, of course, is the standard of excellence and perfection to all, even to the Biblical writers. To say something is more worthy than gold is to give it the highest possible worldly praise. Thus:

Psalm 119:127. *Therefore I love thy commandments above gold; yea, above fine gold.*

And as non-scientists, what do the Biblical writers say about the other metals? For economy's sake, I've searched for a verse that mentions as many metals as possible, and here's one where Ezekiel is quoting God as threatening the sinners among the Jews:

Ezekiel 22:20. *As they gather silver, and brass, and iron, and lead, and tin, into the midst of the furnace to blow the fire upon it, to melt it; so will I gather you in mine anger and in my fury, and I will leave you there, and melt you.*

The sinners are compared to the various metals, notably excluding gold, to show that they are imperfect.

Here, by the way, we must remember that the English words of the King James version are translations of the original Hebrew and may be mistranslations. The Hebrew word "nehosheth" was used indiscriminately for pure copper and for bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. The King James version invariably translates it as "brass," which is an alloy

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of copper and zinc and is *not* what the Biblical writers meant. The Revised Standard Version replaces all the "brass" in the King James with "bronze" or "copper."

If we substitute copper for brass in the verse from Ezekiel, you will see that I have managed, by using merely two Biblical verses, to mention six of the ancient metals: gold, silver, copper, iron, tin, and lead. That leaves only mercury. What does the Bible say about mercury?

The answer is: Nothing!

Not a word! Not in the Old Testament, or the New, or the Apocrypha. It seems clear that of all the seven metals, mercury was the most exotic, the least used for everyday purposes, the most nearly what we would today call a "laboratory curiosity." The non-scientists who wrote the Bible were so little acquainted with it, they never had reason to mention it, even in figures of speech.

As to why it should be the last to be discovered; that seems to me to be no mystery. It is comparatively rare, for of the seven metals, only silver and gold are less common. Nor does one come across mercury ingots, naturally, since it is liquid.

What led to its discovery was the accident that its one important ore was brightly colored. This ore is "cinnabar," which, chemically speaking, is mercuric sulfide, a compound of mercury and sulfur. It has a bright red color and can be used as a pigment. When so used, it is called vermilion, a word also applied to its color.

Cinnabar must have been in considerable demand and, undoubtedly, there must have been occasions when it was accidentally heated to the point where it broke up and liberated drops of metallic mercury. There is evidence in the Egyptian tombs that mercury was known in that land at least as far back as 1500 B.C. This sounds ancient enough, but compare it with copper, silver and gold, which date back to 4000 B.C.

Even after mercury had been isolated, there seems to have been difficulty in recognizing it as a new and separate metal. The fact that it was liquid may have made it too different from the other metals to put on an equal par with them. Perhaps it was only one of the other metals in molten form.

It had the look of silver about it. Could it be, then, liquid silver? Silver itself, ordinary solid silver, could be melted if raised to a good red heat, but mercury was a liquid silver at ordinary temperatures. To the ancient workers, such a difference was perhaps not as significant as it would be to us. If there could be a hot liquid silver, why not a cold one?

In any case, whatever the thought processes of the early discoverers of mercury, it remains true that mercury was the only one of the seven

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metals not given a name of its own. Aristotle called it "liquid silver" (in Greek) and in Roman times, the Greek physician, Dioscorides, called it "water-silver," which is essentially the same thing. The latter name is "hydrargyros" in Greek and became "hydrargyrum" in Latin. And in fact, the chemical symbol for mercury remains Hg, in honor of that Latin name, to this day.

The Roman writer, Pliny, called it "argentum vivum" meaning "living silver." The reason for this is that ordinary silver was solid and motionless (that is "dead") whereas mercury quivered and moved under slight impulse. If a drop fell, it shivered, and the droplets darted away in all directions. It was "alive."

An old English word for alive was "quick." We still use it with that meaning in the old phrase "the quick and the dead." We still say that vegetation "quickens" in the spring. If we cut past the outermost dead callus of the skin, to the soft, sensitive tissue beneath, we "cut to the quick."

Naturally, "quick" came to be applied to the more notable characteristics of life, one of which is rapid motion. To be sure, there are forms of life, such as oysters, sponges and moss, which don't show notable motions, but the language-making commonalty indulged in no such fine side-issues. They knew the distinction between a race horse and a hobby horse. Consequently, "quick" came to mean "rapid."

Nowadays, that last meaning of "quick" has drowned out everything else, and the older meaning remains only in the old cliches that never die and that remain to puzzle innocents. (Moderns would imagine "the quick and the dead" refers to Los Angeles pedestrians.)

Keeping all this in mind, we see why Pliny's "argentum vivum" can be literally translated as "quicksilver" and that is, indeed, the old English name for it.

Where, then, did the name "mercury" come from?

The medieval alchemists approached their work in a thoroughly mystical manner. Since most of them (not all!) were incompetent, they could best mask their shortcomings by indulging in windy mysteries. What the public could not understand, they could not see through.

Naturally, then, alchemists favored metaphorical speech. There were seven different metals and there were also seven different planets, and surely this could not be coincidence, could it? (See TWELVE POINT THREE SIX NINE, July 1967.) Why not, then, impressively speak of the planets when you meant the metals?

Thus, the four brightest of the planets, in order of decreasing bright-

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ness, were the Sun, the Moon, Venus and Jupiter. Why not match these with gold, silver, copper and tin respectively, since these were the four most valuable metals in order of decreasing value.

As for the others—

Mars, the ruddy planet of the war-god, is naturally iron, the metal out of which war-weapons are made. (As a matter of fact, the ruddiness of Mars may be due to the iron rust in its soil. It's this sort of coincidence that causes modern mystics to wonder if "there might not be something in alchemy." To counter that, one need only say that any random succession of syllables is bound to make words now and then, and if you carefully select out the words and don't touch anything else, you can easily convince yourself that nonsense is sense.)

The slow-moving Saturn, slowest of all the planets, is naturally matched to lead, the proverbial standard for dullness and heaviness. Mercury, on the other hand, which swings rapidly from one side of the Sun to the other is equated with the darting droplets of quicksilver.

Some of these comparisons still hang on in the form of old-fashioned names for certain compounds. Silver nitrate, for instance, appears in old books as "lunar caustic" because of the supposed relationship of silver and the Moon. Again, colored iron compounds used as pigments are sometimes called by such names as "Mars yellow" or "Mars red." Lead poisoning was once referred to as "saturnine poisoning" and so on.

The only planet to enter the realm of modern chemistry in a respectable way was Mercury. It became the name of the metal, ousting the older quicksilver. Perhaps this came about because chemists recognized that quicksilver was not an independent name and that mercury was not merely silver that was liquid or quick.

Oddly enough, metals were named for planets in modern times, too, and the modern names stuck, of course. In 1781, the planet Uranus was discovered, and in 1789, when the German chemist, Martin Heinrich Klaproth, discovered a new metal, he named it for the new planet and it became "uranium." Then, in the 1940's, when two metals were found beyond uranium, they were named for two planets, Neptune and Pluto, that had been found beyond Uranus. The new metals became "neptunium" and "plutonium."

Even the asteroids got their chance. In 1801 and 1802, the first two asteroids, Ceres and Pallas, were discovered. Klaproth discovered another new metal in 1803 and promptly named it "cerium." The same year, an English chemist, William Hyde Wollaston, discovered a new metal and named it "palladium."

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Mercury gained unusual distinctions during the Middle Ages. Throughout ancient and medieval times, the chief source of mercury was Spain, and the Moorish kings of the land made spectacular use of it. Abd ar-Rahman III, the greatest of them, built a palace near Cordova about 950, in the courtyard of which a fountain of mercury played continuously. Another king was supposed to have slept on a mattress that floated in a pool of mercury.

Mercury gained another medieval distinction of a more abstract nature. It seems that one of the chief aims of most medieval alchemists was the conversion of an inexpensive metal like lead to an expensive one like gold.

That this could be done seemed likely from the old Greek notion that all matter was made up of combinations of four basic substances, or "elements," which were called "earth," "water," "air" and "fire." These were not identical with the common substances we call by those names, but were abstractions which might better be translated as "solid," "liquid," "gas" and "energy."—It was not really a bad guess for the times.

The medieval alchemists went beyond the Greek notions, however. It seemed to them that metals were so different from the ordinary "earthy" substances, like rocks, that there must be a particular metallic principle involved. This metallic principle, plus "earth," made a metal. If one could but locate the metallic principle, one could add "earth" in different ways to form any metal, including gold.

Naturally, by adding "earth" to the metallic principle, one added solidity to it and produced a solid metal. What about mercury, then? It was a liquid, and that must be because it had so little "earth" in it? Perhaps what little it did have could be removed in some fashion, leaving the metallic principle itself.

Many alchemists began to work indefatigably with mercury, and since mercury vapors are cumulatively poisonous, I wonder how many of them died prematurely. (The vapors affect the mind, too, but I suppose its hard to tell when an alchemist is speaking *real* gibberish.)—For that matter, I wonder about that Moorish king who slept over a pool of mercury. And how did *he* feel as the months wore on?

Some alchemists must have reasoned further that gold was unique among metals for its yellow color; therefore, what must be added to mercury (itself silvery in color) is a yellow "earth." The obvious candidate for a yellow "earth" is sulfur. Sulfur was unusual in that, unlike other earths, it could burn, producing a mysterious blue flame and an even more mysterious choking odor. It seemed easy to seize on the idea that mercury and sulfur represented the principles of metallicity and

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inflammability respectively. The combination of the two would therefore put fire and solidity into mercury and turn it from a silvery liquid to a golden solid.

To be sure, mercury and sulfur did combine—to form cinnabar. This was a perfectly ordinary red "earth," nothing like gold, but the dullness of fact was rarely allowed to spoil the glorious alchemical vision.

These medieval theories slowly died in the course of the eighteenth century, when real chemistry passed through its lusty infancy. During that century, the role of mercury as a metallic principle received a cruel knock on the head. As such a principle it would have to be a perpetual liquid, but was it?

The year 1759 was a very cold one in St. Petersburg, Russia, and on Christmas day there was a blizzard and the mercury sank very low in the thermometers. The Russian chemist, Mikhail Vassilievich Lomonosov, tried to get the temperature to drop still lower by packing the thermometer in a mixture of nitric acid and snow. The mercury column dropped to −39° C. and would drop no lower. It had frozen! The world, for the first time, saw solid mercury, a metal like other metals.

By that time, though, mercury had gained a new value that far outweighed its false role as a metallic principle. In a way, this new value was based upon its density, which is 13.6 times that of water. A pint of water weighs roughly a pound; a pint of mercury would weigh about 13½ pounds.

This is an amazingly high density. Not only would steel float in mercury, *lead* would do so. Somehow we don't expect this of a liquid; too much of our experience is with water. Thus, when a young chemical student is brought face to face with his first sizable jug of mercury, he can be spectacularly astonished. If he is asked, casually, to pick it up and put it somewhere, he puts his hand around it and automatically gives it the kind of lift he would give a jug of water of corresponding size. And of course the mercury acts as though it were nailed to the table.

In 1643, the Italian physicist, Evangelista Torricelli, made use of mercury's density. He was puzzling over the problem that a pump could only lift a column of water 34 feet above its natural level. He reasoned that the actual work of raising that column was done by the pressure of the atmosphere. A column of water 34 feet high exerted a pressure at its base equal to the full pressure of the air, so the water could be raised no higher.

To check that more conveniently (a 34-foot column is a clumsy thing

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to handle) Torricelli made use of mercury, the densest liquid known. A column of mercury (13.6 times as dense as water) would produce as much pressure at its base as a column of water 13.6 times as high. If 34 feet of water balanced the total air pressure, then 2.5 feet (or 30 inches) of mercury would also balance it.

Torricelli therefore filled a yard-long tube with mercury and upended it in a bowl of mercury. The mercury began pouring out, but only so far. When the height of the column had decreased to 30 inches, it then stayed put, balanced by the air. Torricelli had demonstrated his point and had invented the barometer. Mercury entered a new career as a unique substance (a very dense, electricity-conducting liquid) adapted to use in numerous instruments of science.

Incidentally, if the air were as dense all the way upward as it is at Earth's surface, we could easily calculate what the height of the atmosphere would be. Mercury is 10,560 times as dense as the surface air. Therefore, a column of mercury would balance 10,560 times its own height of air. This means that 30 inches of mercury would balance 5 miles of air.

The air, however, is *not* evenly dense all the way upward. It grows less dense as we rise and therefore bellies upward to great heights.

Of all the metals known to the ancients, mercury had the lowest melting point. It was the only metal to remain liquid at ordinary temperatures.

Since ancient times, chemists have discovered dozens of new metals, but none can shake the record low melting point of mercury. It was and remains champion. A number of the metals discovered in modern times, however, melt at the temperature of melting lead or less. Here is the list:

Metal	*Melting Point (°C)*
Mercury	−39
Cesium	28
Gallium	30
Rubidium	38
Potassium	62
Sodium	97
Indium	156
Lithium	186
Tin	232

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Bismuth	271
Thallium	302
Cadmium	321
Terbium	327
Lead	327

There you are—the fourteen lowest-melting metals. Five of the eight lowest are the "alkali metals" which, in order of increasing atomic weight, are lithium, sodium, potassium, ribidium and cesium. Notice that the melting points are 186, 97, 62, 38, and 28 respectively. The melting point goes down as the atomic weight goes up.

The melting point of cesium is second only to that of mercury (for stable metals anyway). A temperature of 28° C. is equivalent to 82.4° F. This means that cesium would be liquid at the height of a summer day's heat, and cesium is twice as common as mercury is. Could we play with cesium as we play with mercury if the day is hot enough?

Not likely. All the alkali metals are extremely active and react violently with, among other things, water. Let the alkali metals come in contact with the perspiration film on your hands and you will be sorry indeed. Since the alkali metals grow more active with increasing atomic weight, cesium is the worst of the lot that I've listed. No playing with cesium!

There is a sixth alkali metal, francium, with an atomic weight still higher than that of cesium. It is radioactive and has only been prepared in excessively minute quantities, and its chemical properties are not known. It would be safe to predict, however, that its melting point would be about 23° C. (73° F.) and it would therefore be liquid through most of a New York summer.

However, combine its chemical activity with its radioactivity, and the fact that only a few atoms at a time can be brought together—and forget francium.

Metals can be mixed to form alloys, and such mixed metals generally have lower melting points than any of the pure metals making the alloy up.

Suppose, for instance, we melt together 4 parts of bismuth, 2 parts of lead, 1 of tin and 1 of cadmium, and let the mixture solidify. The result is "Wood's metal." While no component metal of the alloy melts at a temperature lower than 232° C., the alloy melts at 71° C. It is a "fusible alloy," one that melts below the boiling point of water. Lipowitz' alloy, in which the proportion of lead and tin are raised slightly, will melt at temperatures as low as 60° C.

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Fusible alloys have their chief uses as safety plugs in boilers or automatic sprinklers. The recipe can be adjusted to give them a melting point slightly above the boiling point of water. A too-high rise in temperature melts them and allows steam to escape from the boiler, relieving dangerous pressure, or allows water to pass through the automatic sprinklers.

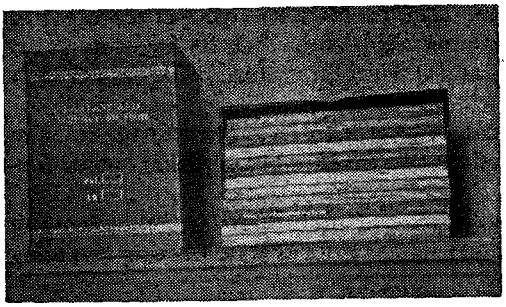
Fusible alloys are also used in practical jokes. A teaspoon of Wood's metal is passed to someone who then innocently stirs his hot coffee while carrying on an animated conversation. To connoisseurs of such things, the look on the victim's face when he finds himself holding the mere stub of the handle of the spoon, is supposed to be delectable indeed.

You can also form alloys of the alkali metals which would melt at lower temperatures than any alkali metal alone—and which will, in some cases, melt at temperatures lower, even, than that of mercury.

But suppose we confine ourselves to solid metals we can handle with impunity. The alkali metals and their alloys cannot be touched. Neither can solid mercury, which is too cold for comfort. What metals that *can* be touched are most easily melted.

There are the fusible alloys of which I've just spoken, but lower melting than any of them is gallium — a pure metal, safe to touch, and melting at only 30° C.

And now that I have finally reached it (see introduction to last month's column) I intend to go on with its story—next month.



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Sonya Dorman has written and published a considerable amount of good poetry, which accounts for the fact that there is a force to this prose tale about four inmates in a mental institution that extends beyond its narrative, as perfect and strong as that narrative is. We urge you not to start this story until you are sure you will not be interrupted while reading it—and for some time thereafter.

LUNATIC ASSIGNMENT

by Sonya Dorman

FOUR MEN, DRESSED IN LIMP white shirts and slacks, were grouped about one of the small ward beds. In the hall beyond the locked door, nurses moved on hard feet, with the sound of ponies galloping. The men stood with their backs to that door.

"It's this way," Braun said, his upper lip pressed into a grimace to keep his teeth, those awful foreign objects, in place. "If we don't make the effort now, there's no chance for us, and we'll live here forever. Understand?" Braun looked around at them.

There was a murmur from the others. It was early in the morning; the light was dim. Keepsy glanced at the tall, wired windows and back again. He was a thin man, the lines of his ravaged face had once been clean cut as if in stone; now his thickening whiskers blurred them like moss.

Keepsy said, "I'll go first."

"Oh good boy," Fomer said. He had a round, white head and a vacant face, waiting to be tipped up and filled.

"Good man," Keepsy corrected him, and they laughed, their heads back, each face opening into the mask of tragedy as they howled their appreciation.

"Yes, men, men," Arrigott repeated, swinging his arms vigorously backward and forward. "You're all men here, boys that you are."

Again the circle of thrown-back heads, wobbling tongues, the jump of Adam's apples.

The locked door gave a clack! as the bolt was drawn and the group dissolved, two of them slumping on a bed, Arrigott standing in the aisle on his toes, Braun facing the door and holding his upper teeth in place with his lip

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drawn back. Fomer, as usual, bent his head, resigned. The male nurse came in, a dark man with a long jaw and bristly hair.

He said, "Keepsy, you ready?"

"Ready," Keepsy said, pulling the white slacks up in place. His waist was so thin and his belly so flat that without suspenders no pants would stay up. While he had other mannerisms more characteristic, he was forever tugging at the waistband to raise his pants.

Keepsy followed the nurse into the hall and down its length, his shadow falling on the pale green walls and his face assuming a contemplative expression. In his mind he concentrated on the taste of a martini, the cold bite of juniper, the salt of the olive, the red, rolled flag of the pimento. He placed one hand over his heart as he walked, where his flag was rolled, salty and strong. His skin was pale as gin, and only a glass could contain him. Rather than a martini, as he turned the corner, he felt himself beginning to fume like nitric acid in its flask.

In the elevator, he felt himself pouring from one bottle to another, from gin to nitric acid, but he was so adaptable after eight years in this tumbler that the constant change actually refreshed him.

Dr. Manner was waiting in his office, and Keepsy sat down in the slippery walnut chair with its orange Naugahyde cushion. He hated the color of orange and sat on it cautiously. Dr. Manner had warned him before that his fantasies must be consistent with his realities; he did hate that color.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said cheerfully, and was pleased that the other man seemed taken aback at the greeting.

"Dear doctor of this marvellous world," Keepsy continued, pouring himself out, "I've come to that decision. It's taken me a long time, hasn't it?"

"Yes, tell me about it," Dr. Manner said. His blond hair was brushed into a wave over his wide forehead to make him look younger than he could ever be. He often looked sideways when he spoke, as if he were sneaking up on the conversation, and as if his fantasy did not coincide with anyone's reality, least of all his own. Braun said if he chose to go straight at something, he would accomplish more.

"I've been thinking about money. I'll concede that I had a very cavalier attitude toward it. I realize now there's nothing I can do, that I want to do, without money. I've kept up my drawing and singing, and I feel that I could step into an excellent job and live outside."

"Are you still unable to eat meat?" the doctor asked.

Keepsy went on, "I've been thinking; after all I've had plenty of time to think. I must come to grips with reality, and correlate my fantasies. This has sort of been

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working in me. I know I was confused about the corporate image, the shadow of my father. I realize now it was only a shadow. I'm sure that I could step into a real life situation and hold the job successfully. I don't want to waste my life."

"Hmm," Dr. Manner said, looking at the wall. "We'll have to talk about it a good deal more. Would you like to look at some of those cards again?"

A black blot like a thundercloud fell on Keepsy's brow, but he never moved a muscle. His respiration increased, but he was careful to breathe through his nose, and he replied genially, "Of course. Certainly. Right now?"

Dr. Manner pressed the button on his intercom and requested the box of big cards from the girl in the outer office. She brought them in. Her shadow fell on Keepsy, and he inhaled it for nourishment. As she turned to go, she pulled his cork and he began to evaporate, so he clutched the arms of the chair and hated the color of orange until she closed the door behind her.

The Doctor opened the box, took out the cards, and presented one to Keepsy. It was a dark maroon pattern, hideously symmetrical, and although it might have been as simple as dried blood, it might have been a flayed terrier or even better, as he looked at it, a baby run over by a tractor and squashed flat. That certainly correlated, Keepsy thought. "It's a carousel," he said. "See? The little animals all around the edge? And a pipe-organ playing a loony tune as it goes around."

"Oh," Dr. Manner said, looking keenly sideways at Keepsy's face. "A carousel. All right. And this one?" He presented another card.

It was black like the angel of death, with viridian moths fluttering at its burning edges. Keepsy could swallow it in one gulp and knew how it would taste: bitter, making his tongue crinkle and cleave to the roof of his mouth; a portrait in epicac, his father's heart with the skin removed.

"That's a school yard; the kids are out playing. See the kites?" Keepsy used his curved, yellow thumbnail to indicate the green things, but was careful not to touch them, for they would run up his absorbent fingerskins and spoil his coloring. "They're flying kites on a windy spring day," Keepsy said. "I used to, when I was a kid. On the hill above the railroad cut."

"Your father allowed you to fly kites?" Dr. Manner asked sharply.

Keepsy soothed himself back in the chair. "Of course he allowed me to. My sister and I flew our kites whenever the wind was right. I remember the crabapple blossoming over by the station. It was a nice old tree."

"I see," the Doctor said, putting the card away. "Keepsy, you wouldn't be kidding me?"

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"I don't know what you mean. I told you what I saw. I can't help it if I don't see what you think I should see."

Dr. Manner opened the top drawer of the desk, which squeaked, looked into it, and closed it. "All right," he said. He threw the lid back on top of the card box.

"No more?" Keepsy asked.

The Doctor slapped the arms of his padded chair, and sighed. "Not right now. I'll want to talk with you again. We're making some progress, but you know it doesn't happen overnight."

His words were as transparent and slippery as little green onions. Keepsy wrinkled up his nose and tried not to breathe too much; he wasn't sure if he had succeeded at all in his major effort.

Dismissed, he got up and walked out to where the nurse waited for him. He wondered if it had been worth the effort, if they were really going to get out, and which of them would finally turn the table, spilling china and dinner onto the harmonious rugs. He hummed as he trod down the corridor, watching his shadow pass on the green walls, until they came to the ward door, shining behind its veil of amber shellac. He liked the taste of shellac.

"Arrigott!" the nurse said. He stopped swinging his arms and tightened his fingers into fists, into which he tucked his thumbs, but then he untucked them again and put them on the outside of the fists, because Braun had told him if you hit someone with your thumb inside your fingers, you would break the knuckles. Nothing was worth breaking knuckles for; Arrigott had suffered several broken bones, including a fracture of the skull when he jumped his motorcycle over a median divider to evade a pursuing patrolman. Knowing what broken bones felt like, as a rule Arrigott stepped only on his toes, carefully.

Today Arrigott walked flat-footed through the halls, and told himself there was a certain satisfaction, a sound of assurance and utter credibility, if you came down on your heels, but he was confused about whether you came down on your heels first and then let the toes slap down, or whether you looked better, more confident, if you stepped out on your toes and then let your heels come down. He tried both ways, neither seemed just right, and by the time he got to Dr. Manner's office he was shifting from one method to the other.

You walk on your heels first, you advised yourself. But you have been told not to talk about walking; it leads to running, and you know the other rules.

"Cheers, Doctor," you said, rushing into the comforting walnut arms of the chair. The cushion was soft, and sighed when you sat on it. You could look out the clean

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glass of the window behind the Doctor and see the pigeons shitting on the windowsills across the way. The pigeon shit dribbed in white commas across the stone; if you learned to punctuate well, there was no doctrine you could not write.

"Good morning, Arrigott," the doctor said.

"You enjoy your walks in these halls, though after all, you see them every day," Arrigott said, and smiled. If you smiled, there was no one you could not charm.

A charm of silence fell on him, although you thought: you are failing, you are not saying what you came to say, what they sent you for. You must say it. I, Arrigott said in his mouth, and it lay there like a marble. Oh good Christ, if you swallow it you will die an awful death. I, I, Arrigott thought frantically; you must say it.

You opened his mouth a little and breathed through dry lips. "I am here," you said to the Doctor. "I have been thinking you should not spend a whole life aimlessly scratching around," Arrigott said.

"Ah," the Doctor said, surprised and pleased. "That's very good. Tell me about it."

"Tell you," Arrigott said, the marble rolling around in his mouth. You arched your tongue to keep it from going down his throat. I, fat as a belly button, don't swallow, for Christ's sake. "I," Arrigott said, coming down on it like a heel, with good assurance. "I, I, I," he shouted, tucking his thumbs inside his fingers where you would be safe, warm, unseeing, nor smell the bread for breakfast with the nostrils pinched inside the fingers.

"Take your time," Dr. Manner said. "You don't have to rush. I? I. Very good. Tell me about it."

"Tell you," Arrigott said. "I am trying. I try."

"You're doing fine."

"But there's no reason," Arrigott suddenly protested. "No reason to state the obvious, is there? You don't need to say it, when everyone can see it. If you choose not to use the first person, if you choose not to be the first person, didn't Christ choose not to be the first person? All other persons were first, you see." Oh Arrigott, you have failed, you are a total washout, your bones aren't worth a penny, not even to the devil.

"You, you," Arrigott cried, writhing in the arms of the chair, on the mango colored cushion which sighed like a woman each time you shifted your weight. "You can't do it. You. I. Them," he wept.

"You're doing much better than you seem to realize," Dr. Manner said. "You've made immense stri— gains. Hmm." He became reflective. He looked sideways, and then he burst out, "Would you like to tell me about walking?"

"Walking?" Arrigott shrieked. "*Heels?*" He writhed in the chair,

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muttered, "Heels?" and looked out the window where the sight of pigeon shit comforted him; it was so white, so pure, not dark like the bare heels after stepping—"Heels?" you repeated, still trying.

"Toes?" Dr. Manner suggested.

Arrigott shuddered. "Toes," you repeated obediently. "Toes and heels," you said, triumphantly. First on the heels, then on the toes, walking, running, jumping, I, I, I!" Arrigott raved.

"Very good," Dr. Manner said. "Wonderful! I can hardly believe it. We'll have another talk tomorrow."

Arrigott was so sweaty and weak he could hardly raise himself up from the chair, and Dr. Manner knew better than to touch his arm to help you; you must not be touched. After a moment or two, you managed by ourself, oh you! you! Arrigott, you did try.

He walked on his toes for the sake of it all the way back to the ward, where Braun sat in melancholy state, their weary leader. "You didn't do any harm," Arrigott reported to him glad not to smile. "You tried. Dr. Manner said you did very well."

Braun chewed his lip, waiting for the nurse to go out and close the door. "Did you say it?" he asked Arrigott, who was standing in the aisle, swinging his arms.

Arrigott parted his lips, and breathed out. "I," he breathed. "You did try very hard. You believe it is worth it, to go away from here."

Keepsy was asleep on his bed, his nose erect as a penis, his toes turned in kindly toward each other; Keepsy was lovers all by himself, his hand over his pecker. He always slept that way. So did the others, except Arrigott, who crossed his hands on his breast, but they had not until Keepsy slept in daylight on his back outside the covers. Not till then did they sleep that way in comfort. It was said the satisfaction was greater.

At any rate, Braun knew, it was all the satisfaction one could get in this place. To sleep, to touch, to gently hold, the dove's body throbbing. Rape was out of the question; he must not think about people but learn to relate to objects.

"I suppose I'm next," Braun said casually, standing up. "I will go and forget about relating so much to people, and learn to see the objective world full of objects. Abstracts. Things. Flat sides, tall walls, stones, green and strawberries."

"Can we do it?" Fomer asked sadly, wagging his empty head. "I'd like to be told how."

"You will," Braun assured him. "In a couple of weeks we'll be outside, and you may follow me. It's a matter of relating to objects. Things. Walnuts, yellow, and women." His mouth worked.

Fomer looked at the man who was obviously his master, and in

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a respectful voice he said, "Maybe you should practice things."

"Houses," Braun said. "Mothers, sisters, aunts, governesses, headmistresses," his eyes began to roll, "mistresses, mothers, doves, blood, seeds, little seeds, I'm full of millions of little seed people, listen to me," he continued.

"Shut up," Keepsy remarked, waking.

"What do you mean?" Fomer asked. "What is shut up? We are shut up. How can you tell us to shut up some more?"

Braun said, "If we fall to thieving among ourselves, we won't have honor enough left to get out. Don't you want to get out?"

"Pure as pigeon shit," Arrigott said, rolling the nice white ends of his shirt between his fingers. "You did try, you did."

The lock clacked, the door opened. The nurse came in and said, "All right, time to go."

They got up. Keepsy hiked his pants up and Arrigott tucked his thumbs into his fingers. Fomer walked behind Braun where he belonged, following. They went down the hall with the bristle-headed nurse in front of them. Into the elevator. Down, down, everybody going down, to relate to objects, to unroll the red flags, to be the first person.

They lined up at the assignment point, where a man in a raw silk suit stood with his clipboard, calling out the vacancies. "Minister," he called, and Arrigott stepped out, pronouncing "You," in a loud voice. He got into the black limousine and was driven to his job.

"Soldier," the man called, and Fomer moved across the walk, got into an olive green truck which roared away.

"Teacher," the man called.

Keepsy hesitated a moment, then went to the taxi which was waiting for him.

"Doctor," the man said. No one moved. He looked up from his list, shrugged, and went on. "Physicist."

Braun walked off with slow dignity to the sedan at the curb, flattening his upper lip to hold in his false teeth.

"That's the lot," the man with the clipboard said. "Yesterday and today, not one doctor. And we've used them all up."

"Have to haul in a few, why don't you tell the patrolmen?" the nurse asked. "I've got to look in on Dr. Manner; he should be resting after his B12 shot. No doctors," he muttered as he turned away. "How the hell can we run a city with no doctors?"

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Lloyd Biggle's last appearance here was with AND MADLY TEACH *(May 1966), an absorbing look at a school of the future. This is an equally fine offering about a man stranded on an emergency space station with only robots and a lunatic for company. Many sf stories are concerned with the effects of the machine on man; this one carries the man-machine relationship a step further than usual, and the result is a fresh and pointed tale with a double-barreled impact.*

IN HIS OWN IMAGE

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

THE SUN'S SHRUNKEN DISC hung above the shallow horizon like an inflamed evil eye, but the light that delineated the buildings was the pure, hard radiance of a million clustering stars.

Gorton Effro stepped from the door of the communications shed and looked about curiously. He had served on space liners for twenty years without ever seeing an emergency space station—or wanting to. Somewhere he'd got the notion that they were man-made, but this one had been constructed on the planed surface of an inhospitable chunk of rock. A landing cradle thrust up through the transparent dome, spreading a spidery embrace vast enough to contain the largest star-class liner. Its supports were springs mammothly anchored in concrete. In that feeble gravity the danger was not collapse, but that the shock of an inept landing might bounce the station into space.

Maintenance and storage sheds formed an oval about the anchors. Beyond, in a larger oval, stood the circular hostels. The emergency manual had promised ample accommodations for a thousand, or as many as two thousand if the refugees didn't mind being crowded. Effro eyed the buildings skeptically and growled, "The liars," though he couldn't have said why he cared. There was only one of him.

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The station's logbook contained ten previous entries covering a hundred and seven years, all of them by maintenance and supply crews. It was untouched by time, undisturbed by man except for those fleeting, widely spaced inspections, unneeded and unused. All of the incalculable expense and meticulous planning that went into its making had been squandered to this end: that one lifeboat could lock onto its rescue beacon and eventually discharge into its life-sustaining environment one passenger: Gorton Effro.

The lifeboat perched at the end of the landing cradle like a small parasite attached to a gigantic abstract insect. The solitary passenger fingered his tight collar irritably and savored his disappointment. He had known what he would find here—the lifeboat's emergency manual described it in tedious detail—but through the long days of sterile solitude he had come to think of this place, not as a way station to be touched en route to rescue, but as a destination. A refuge, waiting to welcome him with warmth and hospitality.

It was only a larger solitude.

The lifeboat's landing had triggered the station out of its frozen hibernation. The air outside the communications shed was noticeably warmer than it had been when he entered, and a robot cleaner snuffed past him, patiently searching for impurities he might have tracked in. Effro moved with slow steps toward the nearest hostel, still looking about curiously. A movement off to his left caught his attention; it was only another robot cleaner, but he watched it for a moment, and when he turned his head . . .

The shock halted him in midstride. A man stood near the hostel's entrance. Before Effro's stunned mind could quite comprehend what his eyes were seeing, the strange figure hurled itself forward in a weird flutter of ragged garments. Effro backed away, his trembling hands raised defensively, but the man sank to his knees in front of Effro and said, eyes averted, voice a supplicant whine, "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

"Blessing?" Effro exclaimed. His purser's uniform had been mistaken for a priest's costume!

He took another step backward, staring down at the man, and suddenly comprehended that the threadbare clothing was meant to be some kind of ecclesiastical apparel. The robes were tattered vestments, the ridiculous headpiece a strangely fashioned miter, the clicking footwear crudely shaped metal sandals. He looked like a devilish caricature, an atheist's mocking concept of a priest.

Effro knew the type. The man was a lay predicant, a self-appointed, self-educated, self-clothed religious, a wanderer by

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definition, a shrewd beggar who'd found in the pietistic pose a sure-fire means of increasing his daily take.

But the last call at this remote station had been logged fourteen years before! "What the devil are you doing here?" Effro demanded.

Still on his knees, the man waited silently. "I'm no 'Excellency'," Effro said. "I was purser on the spaceship *Cherbilius*. It blew up nineteen days out of Donardo, and as far as I know, I'm the only survivor. Toasts I can give you, and a few first-rate curses, but not blessings. I don't know any."

The predicant raised his eyes slowly. His face was old, its flesh shriveled and taut. His eyes, widely dilated in the dim starlight, stared expressionlessly. He held his left arm bent awkwardly in front of him.

He said uncertainly, "Do you come to instruct me, Excellency?"

"I come because my lifeboat followed the station's rescue beacon. In other words, by accident. If I'd hit another station's beacon first, I'd have gone there."

"There are no accidents," the predicant said. His right hand's sweeping gesture traced a cross. "The will of God brought you here."

Effro said bitterly, "Then God destroyed more than four hundred people to do it. I suppose that's a small price for such a splendid achievement—bringing together a drunken thief and some kind of fugitive pretending to be a priest. Cut the nonsense and stand up."

The predicant got to his feet in a flutter of ragged clothing. Effro asked, "Is there anyone else here?"

"I have my flock," the predicant said proudly.

"Flock? *Here?*"

A cleaning robot snuffed past them, and the predicant stooped, halted it with a caressing gesture, and held it hissing and rumbling above the ground.

He released it. "Such are my flock," he said quietly.

"*Machines?*"

The predicant met Effro's eyes boldly. Only an idiot, Effro thought, could look so divinely inspired. An idiot or a saint.

"Did not our Lord say, 'Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.' And these—" His ragged gesture encompassed the cleaning robots and the rows of silent machines by the maintenance sheds. "These, Excellency, are the least of all." He sank to his knees again. "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

The sheer, pleading ecstasy in the man's voice, the dumb depth of veneration in his eyes, unnerved Effro and moved him strangely. He knew that forever afterward he would consider it a cowardly act, but he extended his blessing.

He gesticulated vaguely and

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resurrected a half-forgotten phrase from the buried memories of his childhood. "In the name of the Almighty, may your graces be magnified and your faults forgiven."

He stepped around the predicant and strode hurriedly toward the hostel. He did not look back until he reached it. The predicant was moving slowly in the opposite direction, still holding his bent arm awkwardly in front of him. Three cleaning robots were snuffing after him in single file.

"His flock," Effro muttered disgustedly.

He chose the sleeping room nearest the entrance, and the first thing he examined was its door—to make certain that it had a lock.

The hostel was a self-sustaining unit, complete with airlock to safeguard its inhabitants in the event of damage to the dome. Effro's first concern was for a bath, and he lolled in warm water for an hour, soaking off the accretions of his long journey, while a massaging machine worked over him expertly. A valet machine accepted his begrimed uniform and returned it to him in spotless, pressed condition. A dispenser furnished three complete outfits of new clothing. He dressed himself in one of them and carried the others, and his uniform, to his sleeping quarters with a cleaning robot dogging his footsteps. His bed, which he had tested perfunctorily, had been remade by a domestic robot. It was occurring to him that the predicant's flock was no small congregation.

Opening drawers to put away his clothing, he encountered a book.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. This Bible was placed here for your spiritual solace by the Society of Saint Brock.

Impulsively Effro searched the adjoining room and two others across the corridor. All contained Bibles. Probably every sleeping room on the station had a Bible, but one would have sufficed. And if a lonely man, marooned here for years, chose to occupy himself with a Bible, he might in time become a fairly competent theologist.

"Why the Bible," Effro mused, "when each hostel has an adequate library?"

There was no accounting for individual taste. The real question was why he had stayed marooned. He had only to break a seal and pull a handle, and the station would have broadcast a distress signal until rescue came—in days, weeks or months. No one would hurry, because, paradoxically, a distress signal from an emergency space station did not signify an emergency. The full passenger contingent of a star-class liner could be accommodated there for a year or more with no risk except boredom. Sooner or later, but

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probably sooner, rescue would have come.

Effro had found the seal unbroken. The man must have come here since the last inspection ship called fourteen years before, and in all that time he had not performed the one simple act that would have brought rescue. It made so little sense that Effro uneasily returned to the communications shed, but the oscillating distress signal was still ornamenting the steady beeps of the rescue beacon.

"The guy is nuts," Effro told himself. "And no wonder. If I were here that long, maybe I'd start preaching sermons to robots, too."

One of the hostel's lounges supplied another clue: it was decorated with religious paintings, several of them showing priests in ceremonial regalia—undoubtedly the inspiration for the predicant's costume. The poor, lonely fanatic!

He browsed through the library, wincing when he found a shelf of books on theology, inspected a music room, read the repertory of a theater that offered him his choice of a hundred films. There were robots everywhere. The hostel had accommodations and service for perhaps fifty, and all of the service automatically concentrated on Effro. Every time he turned around he stumbled over a robot.

He went to the dining room, summoned a serving robot with the touch of a button, and punched out his order for dinner. The robot rolled away; another button brought a beverage robot to his side, and he dazedly contemplated controls that offered mixed drinks in a thousand combinations. He ordered a large one, straight, and the robot served it in a plastic tumbler. A cleaning robot hovered nearby—like a house pet, Effro thought, waiting for him to drop something.

The serving robot brought his food. After the lifeboat's concentrated rations, it tasted delicious, but those same rations had caused his stomach to shrink. He ate what he could, pushed the remainder onto the floor to give the cleaning robot something to do, and ordered another drink.

When the predicant entered some time later, Effro was feeling at peace with himself and the universe: bath and massage, clean clothing, an excellent meal, and now he was nursing his fifth drink.

He gave the predicant a friendly wave and called, "Join me. Have a drink."

The predicant abashed him by sinking to the floor at his feet. "Instruct me, Excellency," he pleaded.

"I'm out of uniform," Effro said, not unkindly because he felt sorry for the man. "I wasn't an 'Excellency' to begin with. I was purser on the *Cherbilius*, and the day before it blew up I was found guilty

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of insubordination, intoxication while on duty, impertinence to passengers, larceny from the ship's liquor stores, and spitting into the ventilation system. I was ordered confined to quarters under arrest. I stole another bottle of the best Donardian brandy—with a record like that one more bottle was of very small consequence—and after drinking it I climbed into a lifeboat in the hope of sleeping it off without the interruption of further recriminations. When I woke up the lifeboat was adrift in space, surrounded by debris that included an uncountable number of charred corpses in various stages of dismemberment. So here I am, maybe the only survivor, and I wouldn't be competent to hand out religious instruction even if I knew any, which I don't. What's your excuse?"

The predicant regarded him blankly.

"Where do you come from?" Effro persisted.

"I was reborn here. The time before rebirth has no meaning."

"You probably jumped ship here," Effro said. "That last inspection ship. At a guess, you were also a stowaway and a fugitive from justice, and this looked like as good a place to hole up as any. Eventually you went star crazy. Call it being reborn if you want to."

He aimed his plastic tumbler at the cleaning robot and missed; the robot sniffed after it and gathered it up. Effro punched the beverage robot and accepted another drink. "Cheers," he said. "Your 'flock' is taking good care of me."

"They bear another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

Effro chuckled drunkenly. "They're stinking machines and you know it."

"All of us are laborers together with God."

"All of us? We're men and they're machines."

"Both are houses of clay, whose foundation is the dust."

"Touché," Effro said agreeably. He considered himself a reasonable man, and if this character wanted to elevate machines to the status of angels, that was nothing to him. "Man evolved from a glob of slime, they say, and is still evolving. Machines have evolved, too, and they're getting more human all the time. These old-fashioned robots still look like machines, but some of them are disgustingly human in their actions—which I suppose makes them morally suspect. There's no profit in arguing theology with a preacher, self-ordained or otherwise, but it does seem to me that everything you've said about machines could be said about animals, too, and animals are God's creatures—or so I was told when I was young enough to listen to such nonsense. And they're flesh and blood. Machines are metal

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and plastic and electricity. Maybe God created animals and men, but you'll have to admit that man created the machines. If they have anything of God in them, they came by it second hand."

"Man creates only as God ordains," the predicant said. "Metal and plastic are one with flesh and blood, for neither can inherit the Kingdom of God. On the Day of Reckoning all will be equal, machines and men. Then shall the dust return to the Earth as it was, and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it."

Effro shrugged and drained his tumbler. "So?"

"The spirit returns unto God who gave it." The predicant fixed Effro in a gaze of terrible intensity. "The spirit is God's gift to man. If in His wisdom He choose to do so, can He not bestow the same gift on the machine?"

"I suppose he can," Effro conceded, still being reasonable.

"I pray that He will do so," the predicant said simply. "So that these, who are the very least, can praise Him—for they are fearfully and wonderfully made. If God can bless sinful man, Excellency, can He not bless these, who are without sin?"

Effro muttered inarticulately.

"I did not understand, Excellency."

"I said," Effro growled, "that if I weren't drunk, I wouldn't have gotten into this discussion in the first place. You want to fill heaven—whatever that is—with machines? I couldn't care less. I'm one of the least myself, and a sinner as well, and if there is a heaven, I won't be seeing it. All I ask is that you stop calling me 'Excellency.' "

The predicant scrambled to his feet. He was of less than average height, but he towered over the seated Effro. "You—are a sinner?"

Effro flung an empty tumbler aside and punched for another drink. "In a mediocre sort of way. Didn't I just get through telling you I'm a drunken thief?"

"We must hold a special service and pray for you. Will you come?"

"A service? You and your machines?"

"My flock and I."

Effro guffawed. "I've been prayed over by experts without any noticeable result, but if you don't mind working for practice, hop to it."

"Will you attend our service?"

"No," Effro said, still being reasonable, but wanting to make it clear that there were limits. "Don't let that stop you, though. If your prayers have any kick to them, they'll work whether I'm there or not."

The predicant took a step backward. His right arm pointed at the ceiling; his bent left arm curved protectingly over his head as though to ward off the rage of an

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offended deity. He said incredulously, "You don't believe in God!"

"No, I don't. And if such a creature exists, I have no use for him. The *Cherbilius* had a passenger list of three hundred and seventy-two and a crew of forty. It also had an illegal cargo. Nitrates, I think. The crew received hefty bribes to look the other way while it was being loaded. We accepted the money and the risk. The passengers accepted the risk without knowing it. Now all of them are dead except me, and the owners are gleefully collecting insurance on forged bills of lading. The greedy bastards. If I were to go back and file a complaint, they'd have me prosecuted for failing to inform them before the voyage of a condition tending to threaten the ship's safety. If you can fit your God into that, let me know."

He raised his tumbler in a mock toast to the predicant's retreating back.

He downed four more drinks, tossing the tumblers to the points of the compass and watching the cleaning robots chase after them, and finally he staggered to bed. He was not too drunk to remember to secure his door, but he got up twice to make certain that it was locked.

On the third day he became convinced that the machines were watching him. A cleaner would snoop at his heels along a corridor until he turned; then it would scurry off as if to report. He locked one cleaner in a cabinet, to be let out whenever enough mess accumulated to keep it busy, and the others he dumped outside one by one as he was able to corner them. They could not negotiate the airlock without help, and to make certain that the predicant didn't help them he smashed the latch release. The predicant couldn't get in; he couldn't get out, but he'd worry about that when he wanted out.

He cursed the twist of fate that miraculously placed a companion on this lonely station and at the same time utterly deprived him of companionship. If the predicant hadn't got hooked on religion, he and Effro might have staged some uproarious poker marathons. His remote presence only heightened Effro's loneliness. Effro saw him occasionally at a distance, and once he found him looking through the airlock—trying to say something, he thought, but he did not go close enough to find out what it was. He'd had enough sermons.

Effro ate and drank; he watched films; he tried to interest himself in books. Mostly he drank. Rescue might come on the morrow—or in a month, or in a year. It was best that he didn't think about it, and he avoided thought most successfully when he was drunk. He drank, slept, chased his hangover

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with more drink. Time passed, but whether it was days or hours he neither knew nor cared.

He woke abruptly from a drunken slumber and jerked erect in bed. He had heard a noise—the wind sighing, or something like that—but on this dead fragment of a world there was no wind. He went to the door of his sleeping room. As always, it opened onto monumental silence.

Silence and loneliness. Puzzled, he pulled on clothing with fumbling fingers and staggered to the dining room. He seated himself, and eventually his trembling hands closed on a button and pushed it.

There was no response. He jabbed a second time, and a third, and finally turned a bewildered stare on the long rack where the beverage and serving machines stood in orderly ranks when not in use. The rack was empty.

With a snarl of rage he lurched toward the airlock. It stood open.

The space between the hostels and the maintenance and storage sheds was filled with machines—beverage and serving robots alined like a row of squat idols, massaging machines, valet machines, domestic robots, mammoth machines with specialized functions relating to forms of indigestion in the largest atomic engines, clothing dispensers, film projectors, ranks of cleaning robots, large machines, small machines, even rows of automatic clocks, all facing toward a makeshift pulpit of supply canisters where the predicant stood with his right arm upraised.

Effro shouted, "Bring them back, damn it! I want a drink!"

The predicant remained motionless. Suddenly Effro heard the noise that had awakened him: the predicant began to hum.

The sound vibrated softly, like the distant whir of a machine, and the gathered ranks of machines answered. The heavy maintenance apparatus emitted a deep grinding, the robot cleaners added a shrill, chorusing whine, and as the others joined in, the tumult swelled to a violent pulsation that shook the building. Effro shouted again and could not hear his own voice. He staggered forward angrily

The predicant held his hands in front of him, palms facing. A blue spark leaped between them and hung there. Showers of brilliant sparks crackled around the huge maintenance machines, and dazzling flashes of light began to dart at random from machine to machine. The shuddering sound crescendoed until Effro clapped his hands to his ears and turned to flee. He was too late—he was already among the machines, and the leaping sparks formed a barricade about him. For a suspenseful moment they sizzled harmlessly, and then a tremendous flash im-

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paled him. He hung paralyzed for an instant and dropped into darkness.

"Only one?" the captain explained incredulously.

The mate nodded.

"That's a forty-passenger lifeboat!"

"We've turned the station inside out, I tell you. There's only one, and he's star crazy."

"He's only been here two months."

"Evidently two months is enough," the mate said dryly.

"Bring him along, then. We've wasted enough time here."

The mate turned, motioned, and two crewmen brought out Gorton Effro.

"Good God!" the captain explained.

"He must have made the outfit himself," the mate said. "One of the lounges has a collection of religious paintings. He's copied a priest's costume."

Effro faced the captain blankly. His miter was slightly askew; his vestments were torn in several places. In his left hand he clutched a Society of Saint Brock Bible.

"He keeps tripping over his robes and falling," the mate said. "He doesn't even seem to feel it. Know what he's wearing on his feet? Metal sandals. I'm telling you, he's as star-touched as they come."

Suddenly Effro scurried forward and knelt at the captain's feet. "Do you come to instruct me, Excellency?"

"Cut the nonsense," the captain snapped. "What happened to the *Cherbilius?*"

"He can't remember," the mate said.

"He'd better remember. How come you're the only one that made the lifeboat, fellow?"

Effro did not answer.

"How'd you get here?" the captain persisted.

"I was reborn here," Effro said. "The time before rebirth has no meaning."

"Try that line on the Board of Inquiry, and it'll masticate you into little pieces. There's been a major space disaster, and you'd better be prepared to cooperate fully."

Effro gazed up at him. "May I have your blessing, Excellency?"

"Couldn't you get anything at all out of him?" the captain asked the mate.

"Just some Bible quotations. He doesn't seem to have any trouble remembering them."

"The word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path," Effro murmured.

"I see what you mean," the captain said. "Well, it's not *our* problem. Take him on board and assign someone to keep an eye on him. We'll leave as soon as the lifeboat is secured."

The crewmen jerked Effro to his

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feet and hustled him up the ramp. He did not resist, but he waved the Bible protestingly.

"We'd better report this to the Interstellar Safety Commission," *the mate said.* "Putting all those Bibles in the emergency space stations maybe wasn't a good idea."

"Sure," the captain said. "And while we're at it we can send a report to the Society of Saint Brock. Their most recent convert just stole one."

The predicant did not emerge from hiding until the ship was a fading spark on the rim of the star-flecked sky. He stood watching it until it disappeared.

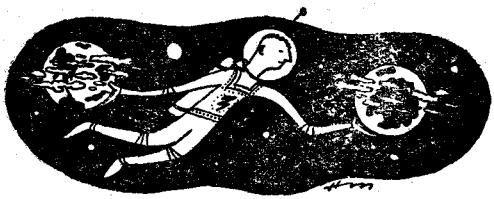
They were disturbed because the purified one's knowledge of his sinful past had been obliterated, but that was the way of rebirth. *Cast away from you all your transgressions and make you a new heart and a new spirit.*

The predicant was loath to see him leave, for the purified one had been an apt and willing student, but it was God's will, he told himself humbly. The success of the purification had so suffused him with pride that he had been perilously close to sin himself. *When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.*

And he had been neglecting his duties to his flock.

He went first to a maintenance shed. He plugged himself in at a power outlet, and while his charge was being topped off, he administered a squirt of lubricant to his corroded left arm.

Then, after humbly crossing himself, he powered his way toward the machine shop, where three cleaning robots were waiting to confess.



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